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HE TURNED AND LOOKED FULL INTO THE FACE OF A TALL,
SPECTACLED MAN IN SHINY SERGE

RED GILBERT'S FLYING CIRCUS

BY
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*"The Patriot Lad Books," "The Junior
Boy Scout Books"*



Illustrated by
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THE PENN PUBLISHING
COMPANY PHILADELPHIA

1924

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Red Gilbert's Flying Circus

Manufacturing
Plant
Camden, N. J.

Made in the U. S. A.

JUL 31 1924

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no 1

INTRODUCTION

RED GILBERT'S Flying Circus is the story of a boy with Circus on the mind. Red, who is slightly older than Willie, must organize an amateur troupe and tour the country, giving performances; nothing less will satisfy him. And it doesn't take him long to convince his four companions that their show will be "the greatest show on earth."

Of course there never was a boy like Red; there never was a pair of clowns like Creampuff and Vaseline or an aggregation of strange animals like Silverheels and Duke, King Richard and little Mex and those evil-plotting feline villains Erick, Fritz and Clarence, not to mention that wonder of wonders from darkest Egypt—Tut Ankh Amen, Jr. Yes, I admit it, there never was a boy like Red; but what schoolboy under the mysterious influence of Circus wouldn't like to do what Red did!

To quote him in one of his most enthusiastic moods:

"Think of a whole summer on the road! Think of the days and nights under the great

white canvas! Think of the fun, the applause and the gate receipts! Think of owning a circus all your own! I tell you, fellows, we'll be the talk of the town. We'll make folks sit up and take notice of us. And money? Why, it will simply roll in, dimes, quarters, halves and silver dollars!"

THE AUTHOR.

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Red Gilbert's Flying Circus

Red Gilbert's Flying Circus

CHAPTER I

NEVER before had the eagle screamed so loud in the town of Twin Rapids. Old Judge Mudge had the poor bird by the tail and seemed unable to let go. "Patriotism! My fellow citizens, just what is patriotism? Is it shooting off fire-crackers or waving a flag? Is it wearing a red, white and blue button in the lapel of your coat? Is it ——" The judge seemed to be full of "is it's" that glorious, hot, slam-bang, powder-scented, finger-bandaged afternoon.

The good people of the town who were gathered round the bandstand on the green, where Judge Mudge was trying his best to make our national bird tailless as well as bald, shifted uneasily and began to cast furtive and reproachful glances at the chairman of the entertainment committee, who had engaged the long-winded, strong-fingered judge as the principal speaker. They were tired of words, especially "is it's";

what they wanted was ice-cream—and they didn't want to have to drink it either.

“Is patriotism a thing confined to us adults alone?” shouted the judge.

“No!” he cried in answer to his own question. “A thousand times no! And another thing, patriotism, like charity, should begin at home, right here in our own snug little town. Now, you boys, what I'm about to say applies specially to you ——”

Redfield Gilbert and his four companions, Pendleton Clark, Skipton Chase, Fred Nash and Paul Harmon, seated right in front of the bandstand, were suddenly aware that the speaker was looking directly at them. And as he continued with many a sweeping gesture and short snappy rhetorical question they began to move uneasily in their places on the hard bench—that is, all except Red; it would take more than a judge to move him. Each of Red's companions was wishing that the orator would miss his step on the platform in one of his emphatic moments or knock the pitcher of water off in one of those fine sweeping gestures; each was thinking of the ice-cream slowly running to milk under the hot sun, and they longed to run after it. And all showed

their thoughts in their faces. Red alone in all that great audience seemed interested in the judge's oratory.

"Why, when I was a boy," continued the speaker, giving an extra tug at the tail feathers, "we young fellows were patriotic, not only to our country, but to our home town as well. We did things! We worked for the good of the town. And after we'd finished work we played—and not until then!" The judge paused for a glass of water, then resumed:

"Times have changed. I mind how a certain group of boys in this town once started to build a public bath-house down by the river ——"

Red's companions squirmed more than ever. The judge had hit them in a tender spot. He followed the blow with what he meant to be a knockout:

"But they couldn't do it! They couldn't earn enough money even to buy the nails! And," he added with a note of challenge, "there's no bath-house there now, and there never will be if we wait for those boys or for any other groups of boys in this town to build it! Now when I was only knee-high to a ——"

But in just what new and startling way the

judge had distinguished himself when he was knee-high to something—perhaps a giraffe—was left unsaid, for Red Gilbert had risen to his feet and with his hand upraised, like a schoolboy who at last has found a word that he can spell, was waiting for the speaker to recognize him.

The judge, startled into silence at the boy's daring, was reaching for the water pitcher. All whispering had ceased as if by magic. Even the leaves overhead were silent and motionless, as if eager not to miss a word from a boy who was bold enough to interrupt old Judge Mudge on the Fourth of July.

Red's companions, no longer squirming, were looking at him half hopefully, half doubtfully. What in the world was Red up to now?

"Well, my boy?" said the judge in a voice that had discouraged many a budding lawyer.

But Red was as cool as the ice in the pitcher. "Sir," he replied in a tone that combined respect for age with the confidence of youth, "sir, as the whole town knows, you are absolutely right about that bath-house; we didn't make much of a stab at it. I just want to say, though, that by the end of the summer—that is to say, before high school opens in the fall—I and my four companions will

have earned enough money to build a bath-house that is modern, first-class and thoroughly a credit to the town and to ourselves. In fact," he added with bland shrewdness, "we'll start making our plans this afternoon as soon as we've had our ice-cream."

"That's the stuff!" cried a dozen voices—meaning the ice-cream of course.

Judge Mudge stood as still as a statue while Red sat down. Then, "I like your spirit!" he said. "And for every dollar you boys earn I'll add another to it!"

Then after one final "is it," followed swiftly by a definite "it is," he let go the tail feathers, and the whole assembly made a noisy rush for the ice-cream, which soon was melting in the place where all good ice-cream should melt.

Red's companions were nothing if not abrupt. When they had melted three dishes of cream apiece, and there was nothing left but ice, rock salt and salt water, they made a rush for him. Having licked their spoons, they were ready to lick their leader. Fred and Paul caught him round the neck and bore him to the ground. Pendleton sat on his legs. Skipton sat on his chest—that is, on Red's chest.

"Are you crazy, Red?" demanded Skipton from the top of Red's wish-bone.

"No, but I'm afraid you birds are," replied Red.

"What did you mean by saying those things to the judge?" continued Skipton. "Do you realize that now we'll have to spend the summer working like slaves? We can't back out now; we'd be the laughing stock of the town! A whole summer ruined! You're some boy orator, I'll say!"

"Let me up," replied Red, grinning.

Red Gilbert had a way about him that was hard to resist. Skipton got reluctantly from his companion's chest. Pendleton let go his legs, and Fred and Paul yanked their leader to his feet. Thereupon Red adjusted his necktie, brushed his mop of sunburned hair back where it belonged, nodded pleasantly to one or two interested spectators and, sitting down on a convenient bench, took out his note-book and began to write.

For perhaps three minutes his companions watched him in doubtful and somewhat indignant silence.

"Now, Skip," he said, looking up at last,

“listen carefully and you’ll hear how I’ve ruined our summer vacation. You own a mouse-colored mule named Silverheels, I believe.”

Skip nodded and wanted to know what a mouse-colored mule had to do with it.

Red only glanced first at his note-book and then at Pendleton. “And you, Pen, own three apparently worthless cats—Erick, Fritz and Clarence, I think you call them—when you’re not calling them something not so nice.”

Of course Pendleton wanted to know what his cats had to do with it.

But Red only glanced again at his note-book and then up at Fred. “And you, Fred, own a Mexican hairless hound that you call Mex. Am I right? Good.”

Fred was quite as curious as Skip and Pen and perhaps a little less polite, but once more Red consulted his note-book and then turned to Paul. “You, Paul,” he said, “are the proud possessor of King Richard the Lion Hearted, a peach of a Saint Bernard, and also of two white mice, Bonnie Prince Charley and Little Lord Fauntleroy, though how you tell ’em apart is more than I can say.”

“Red, are you crazy?” demanded Paul.

But Red only smiled in a mysterious way that he had. "And I," he continued, "own an old spring wagon and a big black horse named Duke, not to mention my pearl gray Egyptian talking parrot, Tut Ankh Amen, Jr., whose great-great-grandfather's grave was robbed about a year ago." He paused and, putting the note-book back into his pocket, began to whistle in an unconcerned way.

"Red," demanded his companions, looking as if they were planning another rush, "what in the name of mud are you driving at?"

"Can't you guess?" inquired Red in astonishment.

"No, we can't!"

"Well, then I'll have to tell you. We'll take my spring wagon and all the aforementioned creatures—Duke, the horse, Erick, Fritz, and Clarence, the cats ——"

"Never mind the names," said Paul impatiently.

"Very well, we'll take the aforementioned creatures, organize ourselves into a flying circus and tour the county, giving performances. Wait a minute!" he cautioned them, for they had all begun to speak at once. "We can do it and

make money at it. I've had the idea in mind for at least a month. A few days of rehearsal and we'll be fit to start. We can scare up a couple of tents easily enough, and I'll have some hand bills printed. Fellows, I tell you it's a great stunt!"

Then Red really became enthusiastic. "Think of a whole summer on the road! Think of the days and nights under the great white canvas! Think of the fun, the applause and the gate receipts! Think of owning a circus all your own! I tell you, fellows, we'll be the talk of the town. We'll make folks sit up and take notice of us. And money? Why, it will simply roll in, dimes, quarters, halves and silver dollars! Already I can see that bath-house down by the river. Already I can read the sign above the door—big letters cut into the concrete: 'Erected in the year of our Lord 1924 by P. Harmon, F. Nash, S. Chase, P. Clark and R. Gilbert'!"

Red stopped only for lack of breath, and from that moment the bunch were with him.

"Red," said Skip, "do you really mean it?"

"Of course I do!"

"But how about initial expenses?" asked Pen—he had flunked his bookkeeping course at high

school, but you couldn't keep him from using some of the words that had helped to spoil his examination paper.

"Initial expenses?" repeated Red. "He means, fellows, how are we going to get started. Simple enough! I've got a little saved, and each of you has a little—if that's not enough, I'll go to Judge Mudge and borrow something in advance from him."

Now right there you have Red Gilbert in a nutshell. If any one of his four companions could have mustered enough nerve to go to the rich judge at all for such a purpose, he would have said: "I'll try to borrow something." But Red seldom was doubtful about a thing; he had the self-assurance of a bantam rooster.

"Red," said Paul, "I guess you win. I guess it's a good stunt all right, and I guess there'll be a bath-house down by the river."

"How do the rest of you fellows feel?" asked Red when Paul had finished guessing.

"I'll bank on you every time," said Pen. "Let's go!"

"Yes, let's get started!" exclaimed Fred and Skip.

"Very good," said Red. "Meet at my house

to-night right after supper, and we'll draw up plans."

What a night that was for Twin Rapids! Sky rockets, Roman candles, pinwheels, firecrackers, singed eyelashes, burnt whiskers, powder stains on white dresses, a blazing barn or two, and small boys crying with the stomachache—almost as much fun as a circus! And in the midst of it five high school lads were in Red Gilbert's room planning a circus that was to be more fun than a barrel full of monkeys all in dress suits!

"Now," said Red, "first of all, what shall we call ourselves?"

"Red Gilbert's Flying Circus," replied Pen, and the others added, "Good enough!"

"Very well," replied Red modestly. "When you fly, fly high. Red Gilbert's Flying Circus, the greatest show on earth—you have to add that, or folks won't think they're getting their money's worth. Now for the clowns—we'll need two."

"Fred and Paul," said Skip promptly. "They won't need to practice much."

That remark almost broke up the meeting, but when Mrs. Gilbert in the room below had rapped three times on the ceiling, and the smoke of battle

had blown off, Fred and Paul were the official clowns—Creampuff and Vaseline respectively.

“Now somebody,” continued Red, “will have to keep the books—an important job, for we’ll probably handle a good deal of money. My vote is for Pen. He flunked his course at high, and this will be good practice for his make-up exam in the fall.”

“All right,” said Pen. “I’ll get a ledger and begin the debit and credit sheet to-morrow.”

“I’m glad that’s settled without a row,” said Red. “Now for a fortune teller in the side tent.”

“How about you for that, Red?” suggested Paul.

“No, I’ll be needed in the big tent. Skip can do it, though, can’t you, Skip? It’s simple enough. Just trace out the lines on their palms. Tell the men you see good business ahead—don’t tell ’em how far ahead, though. Tell the girls you see a light man and a dark man, and that they’ll be happy with the one and not with the other. But don’t tell ’em which is which, unless you want to fight somebody. If a mother comes with her little boy, tell her the kid will surely be President if he always does what his mother says

and keeps away from the bad boys down by the gas house. If the kid comes alone, tell him the next time he climbs for a bird's nest he'll fall and hurt himself. You know how to do it, Skip; use your imagination and don't be too definite."

"Sure," said Skip. "It's a lot like writing an exam paper in English when you haven't read the books."

"You'll do," said Red. "Now for our itinerary."

"Our what?" inquired Pen, wondering vaguely whether he had met the word before in his bookkeeping course.

"Our route, the towns we're going to show at." Red took a map from his desk, and the boys bent over it.

"How about Clearwater?" suggested Fred.

"Won't do at all," Red replied. "It's too close to Twin Rapids. We want to go where folks don't know us. Now here's Sleepy Bend—suppose we open there."

"Never heard of the place," said Paul.

"Neither did I," replied Red, "but it's a good way from here, and it's a fair-size town on the map. From there we can swing south through Dirksville, Meadowbrook, Raven Rock and so

on, reaching Twin Rapids, say, the first of September, where we'll give one big wind-up performance."

"Sounds all right," said Paul.

"Now for the stunts we're to pull," said Red. "Listen to this ——"

It was long after the last Roman candle had spit in the wrong direction and the last fire-cracker had exploded prematurely that the boys finally left Red Gilbert's house and, with circus on the mind and excuses on their lips, set off toward their own. And the following morning they started to turn their houses upside down to find such necessary articles as calico to make clowns' pants, flowing silk or muslin for the fortune teller's robes, vari-colored ribbons and rosettes for Duke and Silverheels, green felt to make a double blanket for Mex, the hairless hound, and, oh, a hundred and one other things!

CHAPTER II

THAT afternoon while sewing-machines were singing industriously and needles in the hands of pretty sisters and cousins were pulling spools and spools of thread through yards and yards of giddy cloth, Red Gilbert paid his first visit to the home of old Judge Mudge. Except on the Fourth of July the judge was really a pleasant and interesting neighbor; we all have our faults, as the cat said when it drank the baby's milk, and the judge's main fault after all was a virtue. He loved his country, he loved his home town, to a degree that was almost fanatic.

"How do you do, sir?" he said to Red at the door. "Come right in. Yes, I know you—I'd never forget a face like yours."

Red assumed for his own sake that his host had uttered a compliment and followed him into the parlor. Then Red showed his tact and sound common sense. He praised the judge's speech, moderately yet sincerely; he spoke of his brother, who had served with the A. E. F., and on being questioned he spoke of his own ambition to enter

the diplomatic service—a remark by the way that won the judge's heart.

Finally as the conversation swung back to home affairs Red spoke of the Flying Circus and of its ultimate purpose.

“I see,” said Judge Mudge; “you believe with Barnum that there's one born every minute.”

“Oh, much oftener than that,” replied Red, and the judge's eyes sparkled.

“It sounds fair enough,” he said. “Have you considered expenses?”

“That,” replied Red, “is the secondary object of my visit. I'd like your advice, sir.”

And he got it—lots and lots of it! Moreover, he got the thing he had wanted from the start. To make a long story short, when Red finally left the judge's house he carried with him a check for one hundred dollars—a loan that he had agreed to pay back with interest at the end of three months.

“Fellows,” he said that night in his room, where they were all gathered, “we're all set. Judge Mudge has advanced us one hundred dollars.” He handed the check to Pen. “Here you are, Pen; have it cashed and enter the amount under credit.”

"Red, you pirate!" exclaimed Skip. "Do you mean to say you kidded the judge into giving us that amount?"

"Not at all," replied Red. "It was a plain business deal, and I didn't say a single word to him that I didn't believe, myself. Besides," he added with dignity, "the money is not a gift but a loan. Get that, a loan! We've got to make good now; if we don't, I'm a gone goose!"

"Jinks!" said Fred softly. "I wouldn't have dared!"

"Now how are things going?" inquired Red.

"Good," replied his companions.

"How are the animals?"

"Erick is sick," replied Pendleton. "He's been eating grass all day."

"He'll be able to eat nails by the end of the summer," said Fred.

"Say, Red," said Pen with a worried look, "I think we're making a mistake in taking those cats."

"Why?"

"Well, they're mischief-makers! They're always into something." Pen made a wry face. "I don't like cats. I hope Erick dies."

"But cats are always funny," replied Red.

“That’s the trouble, they’re too funny. All right, we’ll take ’em along, but you just wait and see what they do. I think Erick got sick on purpose.”

“Well, we’ll cure him,” said Paul. “Otherwise there’ll be a catastrophe ——” which shows that Red chose well when he picked Paul to be a clown.

Three sharp raps on the ceiling and Skip let go of Paul’s hair; then the meeting relapsed into order again.

Three days later Red Gilbert’s Flying Circus was ready to fly. It was a bright hot morning, and the whole town was wide awake and on hand. At the northern end in the middle of the road stood Duke and Silverheels hitched to the big spring wagon, which now was covered with a huge brown canvas top so that it looked like a prairie schooner; behind was hitched a small two-wheeled trailer heaped high with properties. Inside the spring wagon were more properties, not to mention food for the animals and for the other performers.

On the front seat, handsome and dignified, sat King Richard; now and then he looked down in a kindly, fatherly way at the little Mexican hair-

less hound, which in spite of a green felt double blanket and the hot July sun was shivering as if he had had nothing to eat but ice-cream and jelly all his life. The two dogs were already close friends, the one so big and strong and with so much warm flowing hair, the other so little and helpless and naked. Behind them under the canvas, sullen and doubtless plotting revenge, were the three cats. Erick had so far recovered from his slight indisposition—if indeed he had been sick at all—as to prefer stolen milk to grass; only that morning Mrs. Clark had caught him in the pantry with his face and whiskers all white and moist. Circumstantial evidence only of course, but many a cat has been drowned on less. Now Erick was telling Fritz and Clarence all about it.

On top of the trailer, superintending the boys who were adjusting the last straps and knots, sat Tut Ankh Amen, Jr. Now and then he turned his bright eyes from the poor slaves on the ground to Bonnie Prince Charley and Little Lord Fauntleroy, who were chasing their tails in their wire cage, which hung near the top of the hood on the spring wagon. Egyptian parrots are not carnivorous, but from the way Tut was

eyeing the royal mice no one would have thought so.

The crowd had pressed closer. Mr. Cleaves and Mr. Cowpens, the town's rival butchers, were marking off imaginary cuts on Silverheels' flank, and the mule, with ears laid back, was waiting only for a chance to do a little marking, himself.

"Right there," said Cleaves, pointing, "that's where you find the best steak on a mule or a hoss either."

Silverheels' ears went back a little farther, and the whites of his eyes showed largely. It's rather annoying to hear anyone talk of cutting steaks from you.

"It's a great outfit, huh, Mr. Stringer?" said a small boy. "Wisht I could go!"

Stringer, who happened to be the meanest grocer in town, only shook his head and looked at Mr. McCann, who was a close second. "Too bad they're not takin' more provisions," he said.

"Too bad," echoed McCann.

"Tut, tut, tut!" said the parrot at that moment, and everybody laughed except the grocers.

"Now they're all ready!" someone shouted.

Red Gilbert climbed into the driver's seat be-

side little Mex and King Richard. "All right back there?" he shouted.

"All right," replied Skip.

"Giddap, Duke! Giddap, Silverheels!"

Wheels and harness creaked. The wagon lurched forward; the trailer jerked after it. Tut Ankh Amen, Jr., lost his balance and sat down and then rose again with a flash of his bright eyes at the white mice and with many an indignant "Tut!" You might have thought the mice had pushed him. Fred and Paul followed on foot at either side of the trailer; Skip and Pen took their places behind.

"Good-by, boys!" called a score of voices. "Take good care of yourselves. Good-by! Good luck!"

Red leaned over the side and waved his hand, and would you believe it, the faces of half a dozen girls turned crimson for absolutely no reason at all!

"Well," said Skip, "it's a pretty good send-off, don't you think?"

"Great!" replied Pen. "Say, did you notice Grace Overton's face when Red waved?"

"Did I notice it?" replied Skip. "Ask me if I noticed the sun! But for that matter, why

pick on poor Grace? There were a dozen others!"

"Grace's father," said Pen, grinning, "is in the diplomatic service."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Oh, nothing, I guess."

About a mile outside the town limits Red halted in the shade at the top of a long hill, and the boys examined straps and ropes again to make sure that everything was in good shape.

"Did we make a good showing?" Red asked.

"I'll say we did!" replied Fred.

"Say, Red," said Pen with a wink at Skip, "there's at least one girl in town who'll feel bad if we don't make a success of this show."

"Is there?" inquired Red innocently.

Pen winked again at Skip, but Red apparently was thinking of other things; anyway he wasn't a bit interested. At last he went to the trailer, fastened a thong to Tut's foot and tied the other end to a strap on top. "I'd hate to lose you, Tut," he said. "There now, stop your winking; don't you know it's bad manners? Any fool can wink!"

Pen coughed behind his hand, and Red looked up at him innocently. "Isn't it funny how a

bird will wink sometimes? I suppose it's the sunlight."

"Probably," replied Pen, and Skip grinned. You had to be more than wide awake to "put one over" on Red Gilbert.

"Well, let's all get aboard now," said Red. "It's all down-hill to that stream there, and we may as well ride when we can."

He climbed into the driver's seat again. Skip and Pen got into the back of the spring wagon and, pushing the cats aside, sat down. Fred and Paul climbed aboard the trailer, where they sat on either side of Tut, with arms folded across their chests, like artillerymen on a caisson.

"Giddap!" said Red, and they were on their way toward the narrow wooden bridge at the foot of the hill.

Perhaps it was Fate that a moment later sent a big horsefly skimming through the air right at poor old Silverheels; and perhaps Fate was familiar with the big mule's state of mind at that moment. At any rate the fly struck him right on the flank at the precise spot where Mr. Cleaves had contemplated cutting a few pounds of steak. Silverheels may have been thinking of sharp knives when the horsefly sat down.

The big mule stopped short and shivered all over. Deeper and deeper went the point of that butcher knife! Back went his ears; out came the whites of his eyes. Then Red spied the fly and made a brush at it with his whip. But it was too late. Silverheels shot forward and dragged Duke with him.

“Whoa!” cried Red, leaning back on the lines. “Whoa! Whoa!”

Silverheels thought otherwise, and in an instant he had the black horse thinking the same way. Down the long slope they rushed neck and neck. Clatter! Clatter! Clatter!”

“Hey!” cried Skip. “Red, Red, what’s the matter?”

“E-e-e-yo-w-w-o-o!” wailed the three cats, all of them cowards at heart.

“Squeak—squeak!” came from the royal mice.

And back on the trailer Fred and Paul with the breath fairly jolted out of them were clinging to the baggage like monkeys to a palm tree in a hurricane.

“Tut—tut——” began the parrot and then was abruptly silent as he bounced in the air and landed flat on his back.

“Red!” cried Pen as his head struck against

the bottom of the mouse cage. "What ——"
And then he changed his tune as his hand came down somewhere in the midst of the three cats.

Out in front sat Red with arms outstretched and head back. King Richard looked up at him in mild wonder. Little Mex, trembling twice as hard now, snuggled closer to his big companion.

"Whoa!" cried Red and then bounced a foot as the front wheels struck a rock.

But Silverheels would not listen, and Duke would not heed. And there below lay the little bridge scarcely two feet wider than the flying, jolting, lumbering, bumping wagon!

CHAPTER III

RED summoned every ounce of strength in his arms and back and shoulders. He braced his feet and strained till his bones threatened to pop through his skin. And still the mule and the horse raced down-hill as if a hundred butchers with a hundred sharp gleaming knives were hot on the trail.

Clatter! The off front wheel struck a stone. E-e-eak! Squeak! The wagon lurched toward the ditch at the left and then lurched back again. A narrow squeak!

Poor Red, stretched back as he was,—as if he were half-way through a handspring—saw the bridge fairly rushing toward him. There were hand-rails on either side, waiting patiently to rip one or two wheels off, or be ripped off, themselves. He clenched his teeth. If the wagon should lurch between the rails as it had lurched a moment before—good-night, nurse! Tell Grace my last thoughts were of her!

But the next moment Red wasn't thinking of Grace as he straightened a bit and leaned now to

the right, now to the left. He was crossing the bridge before he came to it, measuring with his eye just the amount of clearance on either side.

Thirty yards from the structure he eased up a little more on the reins. Twenty yards and he was holding them in his left hand and grasping the whip in his right. Ten yards and he leaned forward and let Silverheels have it where the butcher marked the steak. The mule leaped like an arrow from the bow, and Duke leaped with him, for Red had tickled him, too, almost in the same second.

A straight line, said Euclid in the days when there were no taxicabs, is the shortest distance between two points. Silverheels knew it; Duke knew it—and how they did run to get away from those butcher knives! It wouldn't do to swerve, no not an inch! Down that hill they ran like soup down the front of a dress shirt.

Bang!

Red, Skip, Pen and all the animals rose a foot in the air as the wagon struck the first plank.

Bing! Fred, Paul and the mummied king's great-great-grandson jounced two feet upward as the trailer followed.

Then ——

Clatter, clatter! Clatter, clatter! Clatter, clatter! As the planks flashed past below the spinning, bouncing wheels Red breathed a little easier. Midway across the little bridge he smiled. A moment later he gave a shout of triumph. They were on the dirt again with a long up-hill stretch ahead.

It was a discouraging outlook—for the mule. They might butcher him then and there, but he wouldn't take any such hill as that on high! He slowed to a trot, then to a walk. Then Red leaned back on the reins, and Duke and Silverheels came to a full stop.

In a second Red was on the road and had the bridles, one in either hand. "Silverheels," he said, "I'm ashamed of you! To think of a big grown-up mule like you trying to run away! Don't you know what happened to Toby Tyler when he ran away with the circus?"

Whether the mule knew or not, he hung his head. Then Red's teeth flashed in a grin as he caught sight of Fred and Paul getting stiffly down from the trailer. Covered with fine white dust from head to foot, they certainly looked like clowns at that moment. And poor Tut looked

more like the dove of peace than like a royal Egyptian parrot.

“Hello, you birds,” said Red, “how did you enjoy the ride?”

Fred and Paul both sneezed at once, and Tut stood on one leg and scratched his head as if to think of the proper reply. Then Pen and Skip dropped off the back of the spring wagon, wide-eyed and covered with dust.

“What—what happened, Red?” Skip asked shakily. “Did—did the nags run away?”

“Did—kachoo—we cross that—that bridge?” demanded Fred.

“Yes, I think we did,” replied Red with pardonable pride. “See, there’s our tracks—about four inches to spare on either side.”

“Red,” said Pen, “you could drive a camel through the eye of a needle! Just look at those tracks, fellows—as straight as an arrow all the way!”

“How did the animals stand the voyage?” inquired Red.

“I think Erick is sick again,” said Skip. “Look at him!”

“Seasick probably,” replied Pen.

“Seasick,” repeated Tut, shaking the dust out

of his feathers. "Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of ink!"

"What we need is water, not ink," said Red. Then turning to Fred and Paul: "You two clowns may wash your make-up off now. The show's over."

Soon the boys were down by the brook, drinking and washing. King Richard and Mex curled up together on the front seat and went to sleep. The white mice continued their favorite sport of chasing their tails; and the three cats jumped down and looked as if they wanted to go home but didn't know the way—at least Fritz and Clarence looked as if they did. Erick looked as if he didn't care whether school kept or not. Tut stuck to his post on the trailer and kept his bright eyes fixed on Erick. "Seasick!" he repeated. "Poor Noah!"

At the end of a quarter of an hour the Flying Circus was on the way again. This time Skip was in the driver's seat, and Red walked behind with Pen. At noon they stopped for lunch beside a stream. First they fed the animals—that was Red's rule, the poor creatures should always feed first.

"It's like the army," he explained, remember-

ing some of the things his brother had told him; "and the way to keep an army happy is to keep 'em fed."

"We ought to reach Sleepy Bend soon," suggested Fred.

Red consulted his map. "In another hour, I think."

Suddenly Skip's mouth fell open; but he didn't bite the sandwich he had just taken from the box, though the odds had been all in favor of that act. He blinked twice. Then, "Doggone the doggone luck!" he exclaimed.

King Richard roused and looked at him curiously. Fred and Paul regarded him with astonishment and wondered just what misfortune had overtaken their fortune teller.

"What's the matter, Skippy?" inquired Red.

"We've forgotten them!" exclaimed Skip.

"Forgotten what?"

"The handbills," replied Skip. "The most important piece of property of all!"

"Well, I'm a dried herring!" exclaimed Pen. "Red, I meant to remind you, but we were all so busy ——"

Red laughed easily and, getting up, went to the

wagon. He returned directly with a big bundle of papers. "Bite the neck of that sandwich, Skip," he said; "it's still alive. Then have a look at these."

But in his relief Skip put the sandwich down and with the others went to Red's side as their leader spread the papers out on the grass.

"What do you think of them?" Red inquired. "Aren't they the cat's upper lip?"

"Well, I'll be cow-kicked!" exclaimed Skip. "Red, you old fox!"

There were the handbills, hundreds of them, just as Red had had them printed. There were three kinds. The first and largest kind showed a long winding train of circus wagons coming over a hill; there were at least twenty wagons drawn by six horses each, and in each wagon were lions, tigers, giraffes, bears, elephants, leopards, panthers, antelopes, foxes and in fact almost every kind of beast that ever ate raw meat on the end of a pitchfork.

The second batch showed two clowns playing marbles in a sawdust ring with a big, broad-shouldered man in a dress suit standing on a keg, cracking a whip over their heads—the inference was that the statuesque figure was Red, himself,

though he lacked Red's smile and easy-going manner.

The third batch contained all printed matter. Skip grinned as he read one of the bills:

RED GILBERT'S FLYING CIRCUS

The Greatest Show on Earth!

Feats of Strength

Feats of Skill

Come and be Convinced!

Greatest variety of strange animals in the universe

They hop!

They crawl!

They fly!

Creampuff and Vaseline

The funniest clowns that ever swung a slapstick

Laugh!

Laugh!

Laugh!

Imported Mexican Dog that Shivers

SPECIAL FEATURE

Tut Ankh Amen's Parrot

Imported from Egypt at great expense. He's 5,000 years old.

Plenty old enough to talk!

Come and listen to his words of wisdom!

Admission \$.25: Children half price.

Have your fortune told in the side tent.

"Red Gilbert, you long-legged eel!" cried Skip. "These are great! Already I can see

the people of Sleepy Bend standing wide of eyes and wide of mouth looking at them!"

"But aren't they a bit exaggerated?" asked Pen.

"That's a fair question," replied Red. "I'm inclined to say yes and no—as my young cousin said when his mother asked him whether he liked lemon pie; the kid always threw the crust away. As circus posters run, these are really not much of an exaggeration."

"Yes, that's so," said Skip and turned to pick up his sandwich. "Why, darn my breeches!" he exclaimed. "Where's the meat that was in my sandwich?"

Where was it indeed? That was another fair question. It wasn't between the mangled slices of bread; nor was it anywhere on the ground near by. But there, trying his claws on a sapling, was Erick, and he was licking his whiskers in a satisfied but altogether suspicious way. Sick? Not at all—not when there was meat around!

"Thieving cat!" cried Skip.

"Go ahead and brain him!" said Pen angrily. "Red, I told you we made a mistake in bringing those three cats."

"The Three Musketeers had their faults," re-

plied Red, "but they had their virtues too. Next time hold on to your sandwich, Skip."

But Skip only grunted with disgust, and Pen glared at his pretty pet.

Presently the Flying Circus was on the way again. Silverheels had learned his lesson and was content to walk like any self-respecting mule, especially since the way was almost entirely uphill. At half-past two the outfit reached Sleepy Bend.

But there was something strange about the town—something that caused even Red to frown thoughtfully as they rode down through the main street. There were not more than twenty or twenty-five houses in the place, and many of them were ramshackle affairs with shutters hanging awry and with panes of glass missing from the windows. No children were playing in the streets; no cattle were stirring in any of the barnyards; no smoke rose from any of the tottering chimneys. The village seemed quite deserted.

"My land," said Paul, "this place makes me feel all queer and creepy. Look at the houses; every one of 'em's empty!"

"The deserted village," muttered Fred and then raised his voice in a shout.

Only the echoes answered him.

"Sleepy Bend," muttered Skip. "It ought to be Dead Man's Gulch!"

The wagon halted in front of what once had been a fine village green, and Red laughed in a peculiar way. "Fellows," he said, "it looks as if they'd all seen us coming. What do you make of it, Pen?"

At that moment a little boy and girl appeared as if by magic round the corner of the old weather-worn church; following them were a man and woman, evidently the parents.

"Ma!" cried the boy. "Here's the circus come to town at last. Cracky! Look at the lion on the front seat!"

King Richard drew himself erect in response to the compliment.

"And, oo-o-o, see the pretty bird!" exclaimed the little girl, and Tut at once began to plume his feathers.

The man and woman came close to the wagon. "How are ye?" he greeted them.

"Good-day," replied Red. "Sleepy Bend is a bit sleepy to-day. Where's all the people?"

"Gone," replied the man as if the word answered everything.

"Gone where?" inquired Red.

"To the cities mostly," was the reply. "Me an' my wife an' two youngsters is all that's left. Everybody else went soon after the scissor factory closed down some years ago. Guess we'll be a-goin', too, right soon. There's no future for a man in a town like this."

"Hum," said Red, glancing about at the poor skeleton of a village, "I shouldn't think there would be."

"Was ye a-goin' to give a show here?" asked the woman with a slow smile.

"We were planning to," replied Red.

"Real clowns an' lions and tigers?" exclaimed the little boy, clapping his hands. "Molly an' me's been wishin' all year fer a circus, huh, Molly?"

The little girl jerked her head back and forth in a way to signify assent. Maybe there was something about her golden curls that reminded Red of Grace Overton; or maybe for no definable reason at all he experienced at that instant one of those great moments which come only to great minds. At any rate he went to the wagon and from the pile of handbills drew forth one of each kind. In a few minutes he had tacked them

in conspicuous places—one on an old fence, one on the side of a house, and one on an old street sign.

“What’s the idea, Red?” asked Pen.

“Why, we’re going to put on our first show,” replied Red, as if in astonishment.

“Red, are you crazy?” demanded his four companions. “You don’t mean to say you’d set up the tents and give a show for the sake of four spectators, do you?”

“Why not?” replied Red. “It’s on our schedule, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER IV

RED's companions looked at one another and groaned, but he drew them aside. "Listen, fellows," he said earnestly, "how can we disappoint those two poor little kids? Suppose you were kids and lived in a place like this, how would you feel if a circus came to town and didn't stop? No, fellows, we've got to give a performance, that's all!"

"But, Red," said Skip, "think of the time wasted! We're not a charity circus!"

"Our time won't be wasted," replied Red emphatically. "In the first place we need the practice. In the second place, remember this: when we reach Dirksville and some of the other distant places on our itinerary—that is to say, on our route, Pen—we can advertise that the whole town of Sleepy Bend turned out to see us play! The whole town, mind you, every man, woman and child!"

The four were silent, and Red walked back to the sole inhabitants. "Molly," he said with a bright, friendly smile, "since the scissor factory

closed down you and your brother haven't had much of a chance to cut up, have you? Well, to-day's your day. Be on hand in, say, an hour and you'll see the funniest clowns on earth and the strangest animals in all the world including Sleepy Bend. And now, Molly, tell me where you got such pretty curls."

"They grew," replied Molly honestly enough.

"Good," said Red; "I thought so. And what's your brother's name?"

"Richard—his last name is Blake. That's mine, too."

"Oh, is that so? Funny, I thought his name was Dick."

"See here," said the man at that moment, "your sign says admission, twenty-five cents. We can't afford ——"

But Red waved his hand grandly. "A benefit performance. Cost you nothing!"

"Well, I'm a cucumber," muttered Pen.

Whether Pen was a cucumber or only a plain pickle, he did his share in unloading the wagon and setting up the tents on the village green. Like Fred and Paul and Skip, he didn't put much enthusiasm into the work at first, but Red was all eagerness and excitement, and while he

was in that mood it was hard not to share his feelings; soon everyone was working like bees at the busy season. And soon the properties were in place. Then the actors put on their war paint. And long before they were ready the Blake family—every man, woman and child in the village—were seated, eager and expectant, on one of the low benches inside the big tent.

How their eyes bulged when Red, attired in an old dress suit and high hat that had been his father's, appeared with a long riding whip in his hand. Though Red had decided not to show all the stunts that they knew, he and his companions had agreed that they were to act as if the tent were crowded to overflowing with spectators who had all paid the admission price of twenty-five cents.

So now as he walked toward the nail keg that had been placed in the centre of the ring he bowed and smiled and doffed his hat right and left. That was so much pie for Red Gilbert—good training too for his future work in the diplomatic service. He loved to do things with an air. He mounted the keg and waited for the imaginary applause to subside. It was no use. He raised his hand for silence. No use at all. Cheer after

cheer resounded—in Red's own mind of course. He shook his head and smiled sadly. Weren't they going to let him begin?

At last he thrust both hands suddenly over his head, brought them down quickly to his sides and, looking above the heads of the somewhat amazed Blakes, bellowed forth:

“Ladies and gentlemen! I thank you for this generous applause—I thank you!” Then as the cheering and whistling settled into a loud murmur and then into silence he continued: “Ladies and gentlemen, I have listened to cheers and shouts of approbation before, but I can truly say that nothing ever touched me so deeply as your own spontaneous efforts have done this afternoon. Again I thank you!

“And now, my fellow citizens, I shall say a word about the purpose of Red Gilbert's Flying Circus, the greatest show on earth. I shall not try your patience. I shall be brief, for as we all know, brevity is the soul of wit. If there is a congressman or a senator present, I make my apologies to him.”

Red smiled as if in answer to the applause that had greeted the keen thrust; then he continued: “The purpose of our show is primarily to educate

and amuse. And what, my fellow citizens, is more educational and amusing than animals? Ladies and gentlemen, it is a hot day. Coats and hats are off; fans and handkerchiefs are fluttering in the heated air. Yet it is not warm enough for Mex, the hairless hound, who is only comfortable when he is asleep on the crater of Popocatepetl, in darkest Mexico, breathing the fumes of sulphur as he dreams of toasted dog biscuits, which, alas, he never gets. Ladies and gentlemen—this is Mex.”

As Red finished he cracked his whip. The flap of the tent lifted, and in trotted the little hairless hound without his blanket, shivering as if he had just come from the ice chest. He trotted up to within a few feet of the keg and stood there like an aspen leaf in the wind. Yet there was no wind, and the sun was beating down furiously on the canvas. Red glanced at him once and then turned up his collar and thrust his hands into his pockets. And so hard did the little dog shiver that in a few minutes both younger Blakes were doing it, too!

“Enough! Quick, the blanket!” cried Red, and in came Skip, attired as a Spanish bull fighter, and hurriedly wrapped the little green

blanket round the shivering son of Popocatepetl.

Then Skip struck a pose and in his best parlor voice sang that well-known classic of the South of France, the Deepest-dyed Villain of Spain—a man, by the way, who was so villainous that even his teeth were false. It really was a pathetic, tragic song—until the last verse, which ran:

“ Oh, he was a murderous villain,
Who loved only to fight and to waltz,
But they found him quite dead with his throat
cut in bed:
His teeth had at last played him false! ”

Mr. Blake, who had been ready almost to shed a tear only a moment before, burst into a loud guffaw and then checked himself suddenly, remembering perhaps that his own teeth, which were as false as the Spaniard's, might prove equally treacherous. But how the children and the mother laughed! Their teeth were sound enough.

The next stunt consisted of “ funny stuff ” by Creampuff and Vaseline. It was mostly a case of “ He who gets slapped,” and the funniest parts were accidental. For example, while

Creampuff was all tangled up in the rounds of a chair, and the spectators, all four of them, were convulsed with laughter at his antics, he noticed that one of his shoe-laces was untied; he let go the chair and bent over to tie the lace. And while he was thus engaged Vaseline sneaked up behind him, barrel stave in hand, and let Opportunity in with a wallop that sounded like the crack of a rifle.

Poor Creampuff collapsed and fell forward. For an instant he wanted to rub Vaseline in the dirt, but he recovered himself just in time and with rare presence of mind cried out: "Oh, I'm dead!" and lay there face downward.

But Vaseline wasn't convinced. He got a short length of rope and with the aid of it listened to his victim's heart beat. That convinced him. He had murdered poor Creampuff! He wrung his hands, and great tears streaked the powder on his face. He was sadly digging a grave when Red pointed to the idle slapstick. Vaseline let Opportunity in again, and Creampuff came to life.

And so it went, and the whole town of Sleepy Bend laughed and shouted and enjoyed themselves.

Then followed stunts with King Richard and the royal mice, which because of Pen's negligence almost provided a royal dinner for the Three Musketeers, who couldn't or wouldn't understand that everything was in fun.

Finally Red brought in Tut Ankh Amen, Jr., and told a few interesting things about the everyday life of the bird before it had left Egypt. Tut wagged his head several times and remarked savagely: "Curses, curses on the circus!"

"He's not feeling well to-day," said Red.

Thereupon the bird fixed his bright eyes on the mice and said with much contempt:

"Three blind mice,
Let's roll the dice!"

And then immediately:

"Three dirty cats,
Oh, how I love—rats!"

At the end of two hours Red mounted the keg again and made a brief closing address; he thanked the crowd for their kind attention and hoped they had got their money's worth. Then the four deadheads rose and went out, and Skip told their fortunes in the side tent. They would all be rich some day, he said, but not while they

lived in Sleepy Bend—which was perfectly true, no doubt.

It had been a great afternoon for the Flying Circus. Red was explaining things after they had all eaten supper. The boys were seated outside the small tent; the large one had already been packed to make ready for an early-morning start. “There’s absolutely no doubt of our succeeding now, fellows. You all showed you could act, especially Fred and Paul.”

“Well, if Paul wallops me again as hard as he did this afternoon,” exclaimed Fred, “I’ll muss up his face for him!”

“Now don’t get excited, Freddy,” said Red; “we all have to suffer for the sake of our art.”

“Huh, how did you suffer, I’d like to know?”

“Why,” replied Red, “do you suppose I enjoyed making those speeches? Not by a sling shot! I was afraid some roughneck out there in the audience was going to throw a deadly egg or a tomato that had stayed out too late. Didn’t you notice how that gang of young fellows over on the west side started to boo when I said we were the greatest show on earth?”

Fred looked at Skip, and Pen looked at Paul. “Red,” said Pen solemnly, “when you grow up

you're either going to be one of the greatest birds in the country or you're going to land in jail."

"I don't intend to be a jail bird," replied Red modestly. "But this is what I want you fellows to get. If you want to do big things you've got to assume you've been doing big things all your life. Now old Mr. Blake tells me that at Union, which we ought to reach by noon to-morrow, there's a big summer camp for boys. He never was there, and so he doesn't know the name of it. But the thing looks good to me. I see a busy day for the clowns! In fact, I see a busy day for all of us, and the gate receipts will roll in like water through a sieve!"

"What makes you think so?" asked Skip.

"Because," replied Red, "I've got a plan—a rip-roaring, doggone good one too if I as shouldn't says so!"

Skip of course as well as Pen and Paul and Fred wanted to know what the plan was, but Red said he didn't want to talk for publication yet a while; besides, the plan was a bit vague. He wanted to sleep on it. He would tell them all about it in the morning.

But before he unrolled his plan and spread it out preparatory to sleeping on it he lit one of the

lanterns and, finding pen and ink, began to write. His companions, rolled up in their blankets, watched him sleepily. A plan—a plan—what was Red up to now? What was—ho hum—good-night.

And while his companions were getting their beauty sleep, whether they needed it or not, Red found a large square of light canvas and began to splash ink on it; but he splashed it carefully so that no one could possibly mistake the characters. Having inked the canvas, not to mention his hands, he chuckled softly, turned out the lantern and lay down to sleep—on his plan.

CHAPTER V

THE circus made an early start. Nevertheless the whole town of Sleepy Bend was up to give them a memorable send-off. Handkerchiefs fluttered under the azure sky; rough hands waved fond farewells in the morning breeze; and sobs and tears mingled with smiles and laughter.

Red was feeling uncommonly virtuous as he looked back at the little no-horse town. "Fellows," he said, "we did what the Scouts call a good turn in putting on a show back there. We made life a brighter and better thing for those poor people."

"Yes, but we didn't build up the credit side of the ledger," said Pen.

"Shame on you, Pen," said Red, whose streak of virtue seemed a mile wide that morning; "a good deed is its own reward."

"Well," said Paul, "it's about time you told us what we're going to do at Union. It would be rather nice if we all knew."

Red laughed good-naturedly. "All right," he said, "let's stop here at the foot of this hill and give Silverheels a chance to get his wind."

As the wagon stopped, Red called King Richard down off the front seat and then pulled the square of canvas from beneath the Three Musketeers, who, selfish above all things, had made a bed for themselves on it. In a few moments Red had draped the canvas over the back of the big Saint Bernard and fastened it round his neck.

“King Richard,” he explained to his companions, “is now what you might call a sandwich dog.”

“My land!” exclaimed Fred. “Red, you old onion!”

The Saint Bernard was a sandwich dog indeed. On one side of the canvas Red had printed: “Red Gilbert’s Flying Circus. Wow! Here we are at last!” The other side read: “Special performance for the camp. Admission, \$.25.”

“Great stuff!” cried Skip and Paul. “Good advertising!”

“Well, now,” said Red, drawing a letter from his pocket and handing it to Pen, “read this and tell me whether I haven’t hit the nail on the thumb.”

Pen read it aloud: “‘To the camp director: Dear Sir: We, the members of Red Gilbert’s

Flying Circus, beg leave to stage a special performance at your camp to-day, July 17th. Our show is clean and snappy, entertaining and educational; all talent strictly first-class. We extend to you and to all other directors of the camp a cordial invitation to be our guests.

“ ‘ Cordially and respectfully yours,

“ ‘ THE REDFIELD GILBERT COMPANY.’ ” \

“ Well, what do you think of it? ” asked Red.

“ Short and businesslike,” said Pen. “ I call it good.”

“ That ought to fetch ’em,” said Skip. “ But hadn’t you better underline the word ‘ directors ’? ”

Red laughed. “ We’ll see that every kid pays his quarter,” he replied. “ I only hope there’s a big crowd at the camp. I went to a summer camp when I was a kid,” he added, “ and I know that along about the middle of July things often got monotonous. Why, we kids used to walk five miles just to hear a band concert. I’ve got a short speech all prepared that’ll make every boy present want to run off and join the circus! And camp directors, too, need a bit of diversion. In fact, I’d say we’re doing them a favor by tak-

ing our show out to their camp. All right, now let's go!"

King Richard was relieved of his sandwich; Red put the letter into his pocket; Tut talked a little nonsense just to keep in practice; the three cats blinked up thoughtfully at the royal mice; Silverheels aimed a kick at nothing in particular—and the outfit was on its way.

At half-past eleven they came within sight of the town of Union, and the boys were a bit relieved to see people moving about in it; moreover, the place was rather larger than Sleepy Bend, and Red estimated that it contained perhaps one hundred times as many inhabitants. Off to the right near a brook at the edge of a grove were two long double rows of white tents.

"Hooray!" cried Paul. "There's the camp all right, and it's a big one."

"We'll be a rich outfit at the end of the day," said Pen, confidently.

"There's some of the campers," said Fred. "Husky little kids, too, they look from here. What are they doing?"

"Playing golf, I guess," replied Paul.

Red Gilbert said nothing. Somehow the camp didn't look just right to him. None of the

campers were running and chasing one another with sticks in their hands; there were no boys hanging from the limbs of the tallest trees; there were no boys fighting, though two of the campers seemed to be pulling each other's hair—he couldn't be sure at that distance. Then the answer came to him swiftly, terribly—the husky youngsters that Fred had pointed out were girls in bloomers, and they were playing croquet!

Red waited a moment to recover from the shock; then he walked up abreast of Skip, who was driving. "Skippy," he said with a slow grin, "do you see what I see?"

"I see a town ahead and a boys' camp off to the right."

"No, you don't," said Red. "You see a girls' camp off to the right!"

"Well, bless the sole of my shoe!" cried Skip.

"Hey, fellows," shouted Red, "brush your hair and shine your shoes; we're going to show at a girls' camp!"

"What!" cried Pen and Fred and Paul all in one voice.

"There it is; you can see plain now. It's a girls' camp."

"I'm goin' right back home," said Pen.

But Pen didn't go home; neither did anyone else. It was do or die—that is to say, go through with the show as planned or listen to Red's words of scorn, and no one wanted to do that. A short distance outside of town therefore they turned into an old wagon road leading into the camp.

Red made a sandwich dog of King Richard and put the letter into the Saint Bernard's mouth; the envelope was addressed "To the Camp Director." Then Red and the dog hurried on ahead, and the wagon followed slowly.

In a few minutes the camp was wide awake. The game of croquet ended abruptly; the hair-pulling—if that is what the sport had been—stopped while there were yet many handfuls to pull. In less than a minute the whole camp was gathered in front of their tents.

"Now go ahead, King!" said Red, and the big dog bounded forward.

Several of the girls screamed, but one who had been engaged in the doubtful sport advanced and placed her hand on the Saint Bernard's head, as if she wanted to pull his hair. "Why, you dear sweet old thing!" she exclaimed. "Who put that ugly table-cloth on you? Why, you've got

a letter, haven't you? Give it here, that's the boy!"

King Richard delivered his letter. The girl glanced at the address and then turned and raised her voice: "Oh Miss Crabbe! This is meant for you!"

A middle-aged spinster in a riding skirt advanced and, breaking the seal, wished she had her glasses. But she read the letter without them, just to show that she could do it if she had to.

Meanwhile Red, hat in hand, stood beside King Richard, waiting—and never did a boy appear more respectful. In fact he looked so polite and angelic that it seemed as if his wings must sprout then and there and carry him up to heaven.

At last Miss Crabbe glanced up. "H'm," she said and sniffed. "Did you write this?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Red with a winning smile.

"Well, then, tell me how you happened to address me as 'Dear sir'?"

For an instant Red was nonplused; he had forgotten all about that little matter. But he recovered himself quickly and replied: "You see, ma'am, I didn't know. Your camp is so large and fine looking that I thought perhaps the Y.

M. C. A. or one of the big New York newspapers was running it. In that case, naturally, the camp director would be a man."

The answer seemed to please Miss Crabbe; nevertheless, she retired into her shell for a few moments to think. When she came out she said: "Personally I don't like circuses and such nonsense, but since you're here I suppose you may as well give a show and get it over with; otherwise my girls will never cease talking of the fun they missed."

Red bowed. "You are most kind," he replied, "and I shall emphasize the educational features of our performance wherever possible."

Five minutes later he and his four companions were hard at work setting up the great white canvas out in the large open field in front of the camp. To keep her girls away from the "circus men," Miss Crabbe had ordered a calisthenic drill; so the boys had no excuse for not working hard.

"Fellows," said Red when they were about ready, "I think we'd better cut out the clown stunt; I never yet saw a girl who liked Charlie Chaplin or clowns either. Fred and Paul can look after the money and be generally useful.

And remember, fellows, we'll have a sensitive, high-strung audience. Above all things be careful!"

At the proper time the camp marched forth in a body. Pen and Fred handled the money, and Paul and Skip arranged for the seating. Miss Crabbe and her four assistants occupied a bench at the back, and the girls sat close together on the grass in front, where they could be seen as well as heard.

Red made a brief opening speech in which he praised the camp and especially the camp directors and then, noticing that some of the girls had bobbed hair, made a few disparaging but not unkind remarks about that form of coiffure—a stroke that surely hit Miss Crabbe in the right place, for she nodded vigorous approval. "And now," concluded Red, "our first number is Mex, the bobbed-haired dog from Mexico ——"

In trotted the little hairless hound, shivering at his best. Some of the girls, notably the one who had been engaged in the hair-pulling match, giggled, but most of them were all sympathy. "Oh, the poor little thing—that's cruel!" cried a dozen voices—and Red quickly called for the blanket.

Skip, attired as a bull fighter, received a much better ovation. He had a good voice, and after singing about the deepest-dyed villain, he was obliged to give four encores.

Then came the Chariot March, which at once struck the popular fancy. King Richard was hitched to a miniature chariot made of the front wheels of a baby carriage; in front of him were hitched the cats single file—Clarence, Fritz and Erick. And in the vehicle sat little Mex with a little whip protruding from beneath his blanket. Twice round the ring they went without a hitch. Then Pen, out of sight in the small tent, struck up “Here Comes the Bride” on his violin.

Right there Erick showed deplorable lack of poise. He had heard that violin before, and he knew that the strings were made of catgut. He didn’t like it. So he stopped and began to mew pitifully; Fritz and Clarence at once joined him. Then King Richard and Mex began to bark. Paul hastened outside, and in a moment the music stopped. The chariot resumed its journey, and Red seized Opportunity by the coat collar.

“You see,” he explained, “all our animals, especially our cats, are highly intelligent. They know the tune. They know also that there’s

only one passenger in the chariot. They know it takes two to make a wedding, just as it takes two to make —alas—a quarrel."

Next came the parrot, which, fortunately, was in a talkative mood. Red placed him on the back of a chair. "This is Tut Ankh Amen, Jr.," he explained. "Tut, tell the ladies how old you are."

"Never!" replied the parrot.

"You see," said Red, "he's modest."

"Modesty is the best policy," said Tut, catching at the word.

The girls giggled as if they didn't believe it. Miss Crabbe frowned as if she did.

"Now," said Red, "tell the ladies something about your old home at Luxor. How did you find Egypt?"

"Awful!" replied Tut. "Oh, rats, I'm tired." And he stretched his wings and blinked his eyes.

"Who's your best friend, Tut?"

"Red Gilbert! Come on, Red, let's go!"

The big tent resounded to the clapping of hands. Already Red was rather popular.

Next came Skip with an assortment of sleight-of-hand tricks. They were good stunts too, but

the spectators were unappreciative, and Skip had to sing once more to make up for what he had lost.

So far the show had gone pretty well, considering the type of spectators, but trouble was waiting with its little pink ear to the ground. And to find the cause of it—*cherchez le chat*. That is to say, look for Erick.

CHAPTER VI

PAUL had entered with the two white mice in the cage. A hush fell upon the assembly; if Paul had been at all superstitious he might have taken it for a warning, but he was not. Neither was Red.

Paul stretched a wire from one chair to another and, trying his best to imitate Red's easy conversational tone, said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, these are white mice ——"

Two girls began to giggle, and Paul added hastily, "I beg your pardon; there are no gentlemen here ——"

There was more giggling then, and Paul coughed, bit his lips, frowned at the mice, which had nothing to do with it, of course, and then, like an over-enthusiastic vegetarian, turned as red as a beet. "I mean," he continued, "I—I mean ——"

"Oh, the mean thing!" someone said in a stage whisper, and they had poor Paul sewed up in a sack.

"He means," said Red easily, "that the only

gentlemen here are the circus men, and of course they don't count."

In the hand-clapping that followed Paul regained his poise. "As I said before," he went on, "these are white mice. I know that girls don't like mice—neither do elephants—but that's because they don't know how intelligent white mice are. Now these intelligent little creatures come from the White Mountains, where they used to feed entirely on the bark of the white birch. When we purchased them—at great expense of course—we had to change their diet. Naturally we couldn't cart white birch trees round with us."

There were more giggles, but Paul had hit his stride. He began to sprint. "First we tried white lead—wouldn't do—made 'em too heavy. Then we tried the white meat of a chicken—that nearly ruined us financially. Then we tried whitewash—that wouldn't do either—they hate to wash. Finally what do you suppose we substituted?"

"White potatoes," said one girl.

"The white of an egg," said another.

"White bread," added a third.

"No," said Paul. "You're all wrong. We

substituted White's Hair Tonic—there's just enough wood alcohol in it to remind them of the white birch of New Hampshire. Now let me demonstrate to you how efficacious it has proved."

He opened the cage and, lifting out Little Lord Fauntleroy—or Bonnie Prince Charley—placed him on the wire. The little fellow raced back and forth, back and forth. Then Paul lifted out Bonnie Prince Charley—or Little Lord Fauntleroy—and placed him on the wire. The two mice met in the middle. What would they do? The audience waited expectantly.

For two whole days Paul had trained his pets to do that stunt and do it right. The little Lord was to wait, and the Bonnie Prince was to jump over him. But now something was wrong; the two mice just sat there and rubbed noses.

They might still be rubbing noses if it hadn't been for Erick. Without anyone's seeing him, he had slipped out of his bed in the spring wagon, followed closely by Fritz and Clarence, who had no originality at all. Now all three were crouching behind a box close to the side of the tent, which they had entered via the deadhead route.

"Come, Prince Charley," said Paul. "Why

don't you jump? Come now, Charlie over the water, Charlie over the sea ——”

‘But the two mice continued to rub noses like a couple of friendly cannibals after a banquet of white meat.

Paul frowned and turned to look at Red, and just then Erick reverted to type. He was a wildcat! So were Fritz and Clarence. The three shot forward with murder gleaming in their yellow eyes. The girls screamed. Miss Crabbe and her assistants went over backward on the bench. Red and Paul leaped forward.

Erick, Fritz and Clarence struck the wire all at once, and the two mice flew up into the air like shrapnel from a bursting shell and came down among the spectators. And then—O Gentle Reader!

There was the wildest scramble since eggs became a recognized diet. Screams filled the air. The whole world seemed to have gone mad.

In less than ten seconds the big tent was empty—empty except for Paul, who lay with Little Lord Fauntleroy somewhere below his chest, and for Miss Crabbe, who was standing on the only chair that had not overturned—she seemed to be waiting for the second flood.

Outside in the big open field Bonnie Prince Charley was running as if all the Englishmen in the world were right at his tail. Half a dozen yards behind him Red, high silk hat in hand, was speeding like a young whirlwind. And a score of yards behind him, and gaining at every stride, the Three Musketeers were racing neck and neck.

The mouse swerved a bit. So did Red—and lost a yard. So did the cats—and gained five. Then down-hill they went, and Red was only six yards behind the fugitive prince; but the cats were almost even with him. In two seconds Red was within striking distance. As the cats shot past him he hurled himself forward.

Plunk! Down came his right arm, and it was no longer “Charley over the water,” but Charley under the hat!

All three cats tried to stop at once, but they were going too fast. The result was that the three of them turned somersaults there on the turf and came up sitting on their haunches and looking as innocent as new-born kittens that had never licked a milk bottle. Then in an unconcerned way they got up and walked slowly off. But Erick was a bad actor; he had not gone five yards when he stopped and made a vicious pass

at a blade of grass. Then Fritz and Clarence of course had to do the same thing.

“Blasted cats!” said Red, grinning. “You would, would you!”

He reached under the hat, secured the prince and then got to his feet. At the door of the big tent stood Paul with Little Lord Fauntleroy in his cupped hands. Off at the left Pen and Skip and Fred were surrounded by the campers, who seemed to be all talking at once; and above the uproar sounded the shrill voice of Miss Crabbe. Red knew just what that gathering meant, and he started forward on the run.

Relief showed in the faces of his three companions as he edged toward them. Something else showed in Miss Crabbe’s face—something that told Red plainly that if he had any diplomacy he must prepare to use it now.

“Well!” said Miss Crabbe—and what an amount of expression a woman can put into that little word! How deep she can make a well seem!

“Miss Crabbe,” said Red in his sincerest manner, “you can’t imagine how sorry I am that a thing like this should have happened!”

“Oh, can’t I?”

“ You have my deepest and sincerest apologies. But in fairness to myself and companions,” Red continued frankly, “ I must say that if everyone had acted as coolly as you did, there would have been no trouble.”

Miss Crabbe's face relaxed a bit. “ Mary, stop biting your hair ribbon like that!” she said sharply to the girl next to her.

Mary tried to think of another way of biting her ribbon but couldn't; so she stopped altogether.

“ Accidents will happen,” continued Red, “ especially when you are working with intelligent animals. Now if there's anything we can do ——”

“ The girls want their money back,” said one of the assistant directors.

Red nodded slowly and glanced thoughtfully round at the sea of faces. “ Yes—yes, a perfectly natural wish,” he said. “ And yet ——”

He turned abruptly to the head director. “ Miss Crabbe,” he said, “ I don't like to think of money in connection with this unfortunate affair. Merely to give back money seems such an inadequate, such a cold, heartless way of making reparation. I had thought of some-

thing else—something—but no, I shan't mention it."

Talk about curiosity killing a cat! Red knew his little book. Cats were not in it with those girls! They wanted to know what he meant; in fact they insisted on knowing. And of course Red had to tell them.

"Well," he said, yielding as if with the greatest reluctance, "we have a fortune teller with us, an exponent of one of the best schools of that occult art. Usually we charge the ridiculously low price of ten cents per sitting, but after this extremely unfortunate accident it seems only fair to offer each girl glimpses of her future—gratis."

A chorus of low sighs told him that he had split Cupid's arrow. Miss Crabbe colored, but not with anger. Everyone was pleased—everyone except Skip. His feet seemed to drag as he went to the side tent and put on his flowing robes.

Never was the future looked into so persistently, so searchingly, as on that sunny afternoon. Miss Crabbe was first, and when she came out of the tent her eyes were fixed on the golden clouds, and her step was as light as moonbeams on a rose petal. For two solid hours there was a long line outside the tent, and poor Skip peered

into the future till his eyes burned and his nerves threatened to snap. When the last girl had been told that some day a modern Lochinvar would come out of the west by airplane and carry her off to the palm-fringed isles of bliss Skip rushed out of his tent like a bullet from a Springfield.

Red was helping to cook supper when Skip landed in front of him, tore off his flowing robes and threw them at his feet. "Red, you snipe!" he cried. "Of all the scurvy tricks! I'll be boiled in oil if I ever tell another fortune!"

"Skip," replied Red earnestly, "I'll boil along with you if I ever put on another show at a girls' camp! Here, have some coffee. You did noble, Skippy, my boy. You saved the day."

"Have to hand it to Skip," said Fred.

Skip chose to believe that Fred had made a bad pun and relieved his feelings by rubbing the clown's head in the dirt.

Then Pen went to work on his ledger. At last he had a chance to show why he had flunked his bookkeeping course.

Everyone slept well that night, even Skip, and the following morning the circus moved into the village of Union. There the boys bought a big supply of provisions and feed, and Pen, who had

got his ledger nicely balanced the night before, had to go to work and muss it all up again.

Long before noon the quiet little village had broken out, like the measles, with glaring varicolored posters announcing the "greatest show on earth." No fence had escaped the dire epidemic; no smooth rock, no telegraph pole was without the unsightly blotches. One old vacant house near the centre of town looked as if it never would recover; Red, himself, had carried the disease to it, and when Red did a thing he did it well. Why, from a short distance that house looked like a Comanche's wigwam!

"How are the animals?" Red inquired of Skip early in the afternoon when the crowds had begun to gather in front of the big tent.

"Oh, Erick's sick again," Skip replied gloomily.

"Sick with disappointment, I suppose," said Red. "Well, Erick should worry."

"I think we all should worry," replied Skip still more gloomily and sighed deeply.

"Say, what's the matter with you, Skippy?" demanded Red.

Skip only sighed once more and glanced wearily up at the big cloud that at that moment

rolled in front of the sun. "Ho hum," he said at last, "I don't know what's the matter with me. I've got a sort of hunch that something unpleasant is going to happen."

"Well, you're the fortune teller, you ought to know."

Skip glanced into the small tent, where Pen was writing furiously in his ledger. On the floor, like autumn leaves, lay the bills of the morning's supplies scattered among odd pieces of scratch paper covered with Pen's figures. Skip sighed again. "Red," he said, "shall I have to tell fortunes this time?"

"Why, of course. You ought to be pretty good after yesterday's practice. I think we'll have the fortunes told first to-day."

Skip looked as if he had lost everything but the part in his hair.

"Cheer up, Skippy, old boy," said Red, "and don't think too much about that hunch of yours."

"I can't help it," said Skip, biting his lips. "Something unpleasant is going to happen to-day as sure as cats eat catsup. I feel it in my bones. Red, I think there's a jinx following us. Think what happened back at Sleepy Bend!

Think what happened yesterday!" Skip shuddered.

"I don't believe in jinxes," replied Red. "Come on now, let's start things. Get your flowing robes on and think of the future."

With that Red put on his high hat, took up his riding whip and as the crowd pressed closer cleared his throat and began:

"Show starts in another hour! Ladies and gentlemen, step into the side tent and have your fortunes told. It's only a dime, ten cents! Glimpse the future. Learn where you're going to die and then keep away from there. Find out whether he's true to you, ladies—a dime will tell you, no matter how thin it is! Gentlemen, step right in and get it over with; you'll feel better. Two nickels, one dime—it's only ten cents!"

"Ten cents is too much!" cried a thin-voiced old gentleman in black.

"If you don't think your fortune is worth ten cents don't go in," replied Red, and the crowd laughed. "That's right, this little girl is first. Don't press too close. One at a time. That's the way, have your money ready."

Red lifted the flap of the small tent. "All right in there, Skip?" he whispered.

“Red,” said Skip, wrinkling his forehead, “I can’t get rid of that hunch. Something ——”

Red stepped back. “All right, little girl,” he said, “in you go. Don’t be nervous. I wish I had half the good things you’re going to get before you’re a week older!”

CHAPTER VII

THAT mysterious and unwelcome creature the jinx has been pictured in the form of a lizard, with malicious green eyes and a wagging red tongue. He is a most unpleasant pet. Though his legs are short, he is a great boy to travel; he has followed sailors round the world—and ships have gone down with all on board. He has followed armies from front to front—and whole regiments have been wiped out. Why, then, shouldn't he follow a circus—and hope for the best?

Skip was asking himself that question the moment he had told his last fortune for the day. "No reason," he said to himself gloomily, "none at all! I should think a jinx would want to be in a circus with the other animals." Skip stretched mightily, but the cloud of gloom that had fallen over him was not to be easily thrown off.

He could hear Red in the big tent telling the crowd all about it—"The greatest show on earth, ladies and gentlemen!" Then the sound of ap-

plause. Then Red announcing the Egyptian parrot. Then Tut's shrill voice: "Bing! Zip! Scat! There goes the cat!" And then immediately, "Zip! Bing! Ouch! Now he's got a grouch!"

Skip smiled faintly and in a preoccupied way began to dress for his song about the deepest-dyed but unfortunate Spaniard who had been the victim of false play. Now he could hear the slap, slap of the slapsticks as Vaseline sank Creampuff without warning and Creampuff smeared Vaseline without mercy.

At last, fully dressed, Skip peered forth from the side tent. Why, how overcast the sky had become! And even as he looked rain began to fall, big drops that spattered in the dust; moreover, the wind was rising. He saw one of their own posters rip from a fence and, whirling round like a Dervish of the desert, vanish upward. To poor Skip in his depressed state of mind, the circumstance seemed an ill omen.

Maybe it was. At any rate the rain settled into a steady pour, and the wind rose to disconcerting violence. The fly of the tent rattled and flapped; the ropes creaked, and the pole shook. Great quantities of leaves scudded through the

air as if on their way to a fire, and off to the east sounded the ominous roll of thunder. The jinx was on his way.

Nervous and fearful, Skip waited for his cue. At last it came, and he sprinted across the open space and bounded in at the door of the big tent; and just as he entered there was a vivid flash of lightning followed immediately by a terrific, ear-splitting crash of thunder. It was a dramatic entrance for the villainous bull fighter, but no one was thinking of the drama. The tent had begun to leak, and the crowd were edging this way and that way like sheep under a tree in a storm. And there stood Red smiling in a way meant to be reassuring. "Skip," he said in a low voice, "sing something funny—the one about Mary's lamb."

Skip picked out a dry spot and lifted his head; there was the crowd, uneasy, excited and some of them frightened. He drew a deep breath—and held it as a bigger gust than ever struck the tent. That was a fierce gust indeed, for it took the boy's memory along with it. Try as he would, he couldn't think how the first verse went. But he knew the second, and without further delay began:

“Oh, that saucy little lamb was a doggone pest
With its musical horns and its fleece-lined vest.
So she gave it to a sailor man to carry to the East,
But the sailor man was hungry, and the lamb went—
West!”

And just then the worst gale of all arrived from the quarter where the lamb had gone. R-r-r-ip! Up flew one side of the tent. Rush! Crack! And down came the pole. The jinx had arrived!

The last thing Skip saw was Paul, Fred and Pen rushing to save the pole. Then down came the great mass of canvas, and Skip was knocked flat on his face. It was as if he had suddenly left this sad planet of ours; he felt as if he were in another world, a very dark and wet world. From somewhere came faint sounds of struggle; he could feel the wet canvas over him shake and could hear the wind in the trees. He tried to get up but couldn't; so, being a sensible lad, he began to crawl.

But Skip was not the only sensible person present; others were crawling too, as he swiftly learned when his head came violently into contact with someone else's. Crack! In the confined space the blow sounded like two dumb-bells striking together.

“Hey!” cried Skip.

“Is that you, Skippy?” came Red’s voice.

“Yes; didn’t I tell you something awful was goin’ to happen? Where the dickens are we?”

“We’re in the subway somewhere between Borough Hall and Bowling Green, I think. Follow me, Skip; we’ve got to get these people out.”

Red led off up-town, and in a moment bumped heads with Pen—another collision in the subway.

“Ouch!” said Pen.

“Get off the track, Penny, and then hitch on behind; this is an express. Hurry up, it’s serious business!”

Red crawled at top speed, rounding turns recklessly and at last came up from below the river. The pole of the tent had broken off half-way up, and there were a crowd of spectators gathered round it beneath the flapping canvas; they looked as if they might be in the cabin of a sinking ship.

“Come on, Skip!” cried Red. “Come on, Pen, give me a hand here!” And he ran to the opposite side, where the canvas sloped off gradually, as the side of a tent should.

In a few minutes the boys, assisted by some of

the men, had raised the canvas on their shoulders so that it formed a long lane like a bridal canopy in front of a church; and through it the women and children passed to safety. And when they were all outside the boys followed.

The first person Red saw was Fred standing in the rain with little Mex in his arms; the dog was shivering violently, though all of him except his eyes and his nose was wrapped in three sweaters.

"Everybody safe?" inquired Red anxiously.

"Yes, Paul has just examined the tent in search of suspicious lumps. Gosh, this is awful, Red!"

"How are the animals?" asked Red. "All safe and sound?"

"Safe and soaked!" came Tut's soprano from the back of the spring wagon.

"Can't find the cats," said Fred.

"Good! Maybe they're drowned!" exclaimed Pen gleefully, coming up at that moment.

Red glanced swiftly round. There was the big tent looking like a punctured Boche balloon—yards and yards of torn and muddy canvas. Little groups of the townsfolk, whose ancestors may have been ducks or turtles, were standing

about in the rain, ready to move off at the first call for help. Others, whose forebears were less amphibious, were watching from doorways and windows. But most of the spectators were by that time within four walls, hunting for dry changes of clothing.

“Say!” exclaimed Red. “Where’s the side tent?”

Pen, who had gone to find his ledger, returned at that moment with the book and a face as long as the columns of figures in it. He took Red by the arm and led him solemnly a few yards down the street; then he stopped and pointed. “There’s the tent,” he said sorrowfully.

“Who the dickens pitched it there?” exclaimed Red, following the direction of his clerical companion’s index finger.

There was the small tent hanging like a boy’s kite from the upper branches of an old maple.

“Talk about the wreck of the *Hesperus*!” muttered Red.

“I told you something would happen,” said Skip. “We’re jinxed, that’s what!”

But Red did not even hear. “Fellows,” he said at last, “this is just another of those unfortunate circumstances that go to make up the life

of circus men. It's hard luck for us, and it's hard luck for those people, especially the children, who paid good money to see the show. The performance wasn't half over when the tent fell. We've got to make good somehow."

"How?" asked Pen. "Give them their money back?"

"Oh, no need of that, I hope," said Red.

"Well, what can we do? Seems to me we're ruined!"

Red was thoughtful. At last with one of his emergency ideas that he seemed to carry round like extra shoe-laces he turned—and looked full into the face of a tall spectacled man in shiny blue serge. He was as thin as a pencil, and on his coat were white spots that looked like paste. The fingers of his right hand, which clutched a small pad, were long and calloused as if from holding a pencil, and his lower lip was dirty as if from putting the pencil carelessly into his mouth.

"Good-day," he said sharply. "I'm a reporter from the Union Clarion." He might also have said that he was editor-in-chief as well as business manager, circulation manager and make-up man.

"You're just the person I want to see!" ex-

claimed Red. "Skip," he added, "take charge, will you, and see if you can get things into some kind of order. I'm going up to the Clarion office—back in half an hour."

"Good," said the reporter-editor and so forth, though Skip couldn't see just what was so good about it.

"Now," said Red as the two hurried along through the rain, "you want a story from me, don't you?"

"That's my business."

"Is the Clarion a daily paper?"

"No, weekly; it'll be on the streets to-morrow."

"Good," said Red.

They entered the Clarion office with its one desk, its one typewriter, its one telephone and its ten waste paper baskets—by the looks of the floor ten more would have been useful.

"Now," said Red, "before I give you a story I want to give you something better. How much for a hundred-word box ad on the front page?"

The editor caught himself from going over backward in his chair, gulped once and replied: "Ten cents a line, eight words to the line—eight into a hundred goes twelve and a half—one dollar

and twenty-five cents—plus one dollar for the box—is two dollars and twenty-five cents.”

“Good,” said Red and, picking up a piece of paper, began to write.

Skip and the others meanwhile were doing big things with the big tent; as for the little tent, that was a small matter for the present. With the aid of two long heavy sticks they spliced the tent pole and, assisted by three or four men who had read Toby Tyler in their youth, managed to get the canvas back where it belonged. By that time the rain had ceased to fall, and the wind had gone off somewhere else to blow about how it had wrecked a circus. The tent looked as if it had been stabbed to death by the deepest-dyed Spaniard—or bitten to death by his false teeth. There were seven long and unsightly rents, most of them near the top—showing that even in the little town of Union rents were high.

When Red returned he found his companions, all except Pen, putting things to rights inside and caring for the animals. “Fine work, fellows!” he said enthusiastically. “Where’s Pen?”

“He’s out looking for the Three Musketeers,” replied Paul.

Fred grinned for the first time since the storm.

“I guess he wants to make sure they don’t come back.”

“Well,” said Red, “let’s get the little tent down and then when we get it down put it up. That’s right, Skip, grin, you old herring! Has our jinx left us?”

“I don’t know,” replied Skip. “I wish I did.”

CHAPTER VIII

RED was no swivel-chair circus man. He climbed the maple and disentangled the side tent, which fell like a giant wash-rag, barely missing Skip, who was still wondering about the jinx. In ten minutes the boys had it in place. Then Fred and Paul built a small fire and, while Skip and Red were feeding the animals, started supper.

Pen soon returned with a triumphant grin.

"So you didn't find 'em?" said Red.

"Nope. They're gone for good this time!"

Red made no reply; he knew cats better than Pen did. After a few moments he said, "Well, Pen, how do our books stand now?"

Pen sighed. "Right after supper I'll get to work," he said.

And he did. Twice his fountain pen went dry, and he almost wore the hair off one side of his head with his finger tips; but neither the scratching of his fingers nor the scratching of his pen would make the confounded books balance. At last he sat back and gazed helplessly at the

candle, which refused to throw any light on the situation.

“What’s the matter?” asked Red.

“I’m stuck. By jingoes, it would take a tight-rope walker to balance these books!”

“Just what is the trouble?” asked Red.

“Well,” replied Pen, “we took in thirty-six dollars and seventy-five cents yesterday at that girls’ camp; and I’m absolutely sure we took in an even forty dollars to-day, including the fortunes.”

“Well, that makes seventy-six dollars and seventy-five cents,” said Red.

“Of course it does. Well, we paid out twenty-two dollars and a half for grub. That leaves a balance of fifty-four dollars and twenty-five cents.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Of course it’s right,” said Pen. “But tell me this: how is it the actual money in our box adds up to only fifty-two dollars? Did it fly away? Did the Three Musketeers run off with it? By thunder, I wouldn’t put it past ’em!” Pen seemed a bit upset.

“Oh, say!” exclaimed Red with a slow grin and drew a piece of paper from his pocket. “I

meant to give this to you before, Pen. I paid out two and a quarter for an ad in to-morrow's 'Union Clarion.'

"Oh," said Pen, and there was relief in his tone. "That makes it right, then. But after this, Red ——"

"An ad in the paper?" interrupted Skip. "What for?"

"Oh, just to make good to our patrons who suffered to-day," replied Red.

His four companions exchanged doubtful glances. "I suppose," said Skip, "we'll have to give another benefit performance."

"Well, I suppose you might call it that. There now, Skippy, don't you go and look like the last rose of summer—or of winter either. Our motto—that is one of our mottos—is to satisfy. If we can't satisfy we ought to go out of business. You wouldn't want to leave a lot of kids dissatisfied, would you?"

"Huh," said Skip doubtfully and then with a glance at Paul added: "I suppose some of those kids had golden curls and blue eyes, didn't they, Paul?"

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded Red.

“Oh, nothing,” replied Skip, and for the next few minutes the tent was so silent that you could hear Tut out in the wagon scratching his ear.

Early the following morning the Clarion blared forth with a big story about the ill wind that tried to blow Red Gilbert's Flying Circus inside out. It was a pretty good account, though it quite ruined the editor's chances of ever getting a job in Boston; he split ten infinitives in the first column. Red had been rather more humane when he wrote his advertisement. It appeared thus:

Whose Fault Was It?

Surely not ours! Surely not yours!

All right, let's blame the weather for bringing to an untimely end the first performance at Union of Red Gilbert's Flying Circus, positively the Greatest Show on Earth!

At three o'clock this afternoon the performance will be repeated. Children will be admitted free! All others, twenty-five cents.

Do you want Five Dollars?

We don't, but we do want a good advertising slogan. We'll pay five dol-

lars for the best. Each suggestion must be accompanied by twenty-five cents. Purchase a pink slip at the side tent before the show begins.

Red's four companions who had been bending eagerly over a copy of the *Clarion*, looked up at their leader with an expression that he was becoming used to.

"Red, are you ——" Skip paused.

"No, I'm not crazy, Skippy," said Red. "We need a good slogan, don't we? Well, here's a chance to get one and at the same time add a bit to the credit side of Pen's ledger."

Having got over the first shock, his companions admitted that the idea might be good. "But who'll take charge of the thing?" asked Paul.

"Oh, I'll see to that," replied Red easily. "Now let's see if we can make this tent look a little less like a Russian's coat."

The boys set to work at once; they did improve the looks of the canvas, but to mend it thoroughly in so short a time would have required the services of Omar the tent maker. However, by three o'clock things were in fair shape, and the show began with the usual short snappy speech by Red.

Many of the adult spectators and one or two of the children, who composed at least three-quarters of the crowd, held pink slips that they had procured from Red at the side tent—for the modest sum of twenty-five cents. After the clown act Skip went round and collected them; he turned them over to Red—twenty-eight of them—and Red retired to read and to judge.

Red's face was a study as he sat in the side tent with a pad in front of him and a pencil behind his ear. Here was a situation that called for much diplomacy, and it is not strange perhaps that his thoughts wandered to Grace Overton with her blue eyes and golden curls. He could hear Skip in the big tent singing a lilting song of the South, the burden of which was, "When Ah was in dat railroad wreck, who pried de engine off mah neck?"

When Skip had finished explaining for the third time that he had had to pry it off, himself, Red entered with his pad in hand and a crisp five-dollar bill in his buttonhole.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "you will all be interested to hear the results of our little contest." He glanced at his list. "All the sug-

gestions that I have received are good—yes, astonishingly good. Oddly enough, though, twelve of them are alike or nearly so. Twelve persons are agreed that our slogan should be: ‘A whale of a show!’ ”

A low murmur accompanied by a few suppressed titters filled the tent. “That,” continued Red, “is a mighty good line, but unfortunately there are better ones.” A few sighs followed the announcement.

“Four persons,” continued Red, “think that ‘Honesty is the Best Policy’ would be appropriate. So it would, so it would! But since our policy is honesty above all things, we would prefer not to advertise it—that is, to boast about it. Now six persons suggested ‘Twenty-five cents’ worth of fun’—which strikes the judges as being altogether too modest.”

A vigorous clapping of hands showed that the boys and girls, who had been admitted free, agreed perfectly with that remark.

“Two persons,” said Red, “suggested ‘Come and laugh,’ and three more suggested ‘Laugh and learn,’ both of which are mighty good, but, unfortunately for them, not so good—so the judges have decided—as that which Miss

Hortense Lee has suggested. Her slogan is: 'A Million Laughs per Minute!'

"Will Miss Lee please step forward and accept her prize?" And Red pulled the expensive bouquet from his buttonhole.

Amid loud applause a little girl with blue eyes and golden curls walked bashfully across the sawdust ring.

Skip nudged Pen, but, catching Red's glance, pretended to scratch his arm.

"I take great pleasure," said Red, handing Miss Hortense Lee the prize for a "Million Laughs per Minute," "in presenting to you this greenback photograph of Abraham Lincoln. On the back at the left you will notice is a snapshot of Columbus discovering America; on the right is a picture of the Pilgrims making a successful landing after the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic. May you soon discover the thing you want most of all, and then may you land it!"

Miss Lee bowed and blushed. The spectators clapped their hands and cheered. And Red stood there with the look of a man who has done a great thing.

Nevertheless, Red was worried, and as soon as

the show was ended he called his companions together. "Here, Pen," he said, handing the bookkeeper two dollars, "this is our profit on the slogan contest."

"Huh," said Pen scornfully, "what'll we buy with it—peanuts?"

Red's face brightened. "By golly, that's an idea! Yes, sir, we'll buy peanuts and sell 'em at every performance hereafter. I thought we lacked something that every circus ought to have. But there's something else I wanted to speak about. Has there been any word of the three cats?"

"Not a syllable!" exclaimed Pen gleefully.

"Well," said Red, "we've got to find them. They're an important part of the show. We can't afford to lose them."

"You're right," said Skip, and Paul and Fred nodded. Pen only groaned.

"Now how are we going to find them?" continued Red.

"We might advertise and offer a reward," Paul suggested.

"No, that wouldn't do. By morning we'd have a hundred cats on our hands."

Pen grinned. "Leave a bottle of milk outside

the tent to-night, and in the morning you'll find no cream on top. Then look for three cats with white whiskers and you'll have Erick, Fritz and Clarence."

Red regarded him reproachfully. "I think," he said after a pause, "we'd better hunt now while there's still daylight. Come on, fellows, let's clean up a bit and then start out—all except Pen; he can stay here and look after the tents."

So they set forth and separated at the main square. But the town of Union seemed to be quite catless. There were footprints in the mud round many of the back porches; there were cat hairs on many of the fences—footprints to right of them, cat hairs to left of them, but all the cats had fled. When the searchers returned Red looked discouraged for the first time since leaving Twin Rapids.

The next morning the boys hired a tailor to sew up the tent properly, and the man did it so well that Pen was obliged to add eight dollars and seventy-five cents to the debit side of the ledger. Then after a few purchases, which set them back ten more dollars, the Flying Circus preened its wings and prepared to fly toward the distant town of Dirksville.

Red talked and laughed as he helped the others load the wagon and hitch the trailer on behind, but once the outfit was clear of the town, he relapsed into unaccustomed silence. Pen was on the driver's seat, gleeful because they had lost the Three Musketeers; Red walked behind with Skip, chagrined because they had been unable to find them.

"Red," said Skip at last, "I've got that queer feeling again."

"What queer feeling?"

"Why, it's the funniest thing, but I feel just the way I felt day before yesterday when the storm ripped things up so. I—I feel as if our jinx had returned."

Red lost his solemn look at once. "You're an old grandmother, Skip!" he exclaimed. "I've told you a hundred times there's no such thing as a jinx."

"I saw one once," replied Skip.

"Then you must have been eating too much hot mince pie."

"No, I hadn't eaten any mince pie," said Skip firmly.

"Well, we won't mince matters," said Red. "Tell me where you saw one."

Skip hesitated. "Why—why, it was in the newspaper."

"What part of the newspaper?"

"Why—I don't just remember."

"Skip," said Red, grinning, "you saw it on the funny page, and you know you did! That's the only place you'll ever see a jinx."

Skip wasn't convinced, but he knew better than to prolong an argument with Red; so he merely added that, jinx or no jinx, high jinx or low jinx, he had that queer feeling, and he couldn't help it if he did!

"Well," said Red, "here's a river. Hello, what's happened to the bridge?"

"It's gone," said Skip. "See?"

Pen halted the team, and the boys looked with some dismay at the river ahead of them. The four stone pillars that had held the bridge were still standing, but the bridge itself, bent and twisted, lay half submerged a hundred yards down-stream.

"The jinx again," muttered Skip.

"I'd say it was high water that did it," remarked Red. "But there's a fellow down there with a motor boat. Let's see what he has to say."

Leaving Pen with the wagon, the four crossed

a field and hurried down to the edge of the bank, where an old darky was sitting on a rock, mending a fishing line.

"Good-day, sir," said Red pleasantly.

"Howdy," replied the old man, and the sun flashed on an imitation gold tooth.

"What happened to the bridge?"

"Flood—two days ago. Mos' powerful flood Ah ever see."

"How do folks get across?" continued Red.

"Ah takes 'em fo' two bits in ma li'l boat."

"But we have a team up on the hill."

"Ah takes teamses fo' a dollah."

"Not in that little boat!"

Again the gold tooth flashed. "Bless you' soul, no. Ah got a raf' yonder. It's five mile up nor down to the nex' bridge. Ah got a raf'. Ah charges one buck fo' teamses."

Red glanced once at the raft, which lay partly hidden by a growth of rushes, and said: "You're the man for us!"

CHAPTER IX

THE old darky saluted Red in his best Civil War manner. "Ah'm yo' man," he said gravely. "Yas, Ah'm yo' man—for four bits an' whatever else you all sees fit to give me."

"Good," said Red. "Now you bring the raft up, and we'll bring the team down."

"Ah'm off lak a shot," said the darky and strolled leisurely down toward his raft.

Skip looked at Red with that dismal expression which only a person who thinks he is jinxed can assume. Then shaking his head sadly, he followed his companions up the hill to the wagon.

"This way, Pen!" shouted Red. "The army's going to embark down yonder at the landing."

"What, on that raft the fellow's getting ready?"

"Sure thing," replied Red. "We're lucky not to have to swim or build another bridge!"

"Yip, yip!" cried Pen in genuine cowboy fashion. "Pike's Peak or busted traces! Giddap, Duke! Giddap, Silverheels!"

Uncle George—that was the darky's name—had poled the raft up alongside the motor boat by the time the spring wagon had made its difficult way across the field and down to the edge of the river. An immense raft it was too and might well have ferried a house across.

At sight of the wagon and trailer, both heaped high with equipment, and with the St. Bernard and the hairless hound on the front seat, the white mice swinging from their cage beneath the hood and Tut Ankh Amen, Jr., standing on one foot on a roll of canvas, Uncle George's lower jaw dropped like a trap-door. "Fo' de land's sakes!" he exclaimed. "Am Ah awake, or am Ah jest dreamin' a dream?"

"You're wide awake, Uncle George," said Red. "This is Red Gilbert's Flying Circus, and it's going to be your privilege to help us on our way to Dirksville, where eager multitudes are waiting to receive us."

The trap-door came slowly back into place. Then ——

"Let's roll the dice!" shrilled the parrot. "Let's roll the dice!"

The old man's fingers twitched, and his eyes were a study in black and white. "Dat am a

intel'gent pirate yonder, scratchin' he ear," he said. "Where you all come by him?"

"He was born in Egypt," said Pen.

"Therefore," added Red, "he can never become President, can you, Tut?"

"Who in blazes wants to be President?" replied the bird. "Hurrah for Red Gilbert!"

Uncle George would have stood and listened all day, but Red thrust his garrulous pet inside the wagon. "Now, fellows," he said, "let's go aboard. Come on, Skippy, forget that jinx and skip over here. You're wanted."

It was hard and delicate work, getting all the stuff aboard the raft; indeed to Uncle George it seemed quite impossible. But he didn't know Red. First, under Red's peerless leadership, the boys unhitched the horse and the jack; then they uncoupled the trailer and lifted some of the heaviest stuff out of the spring wagon.

"Now," said Red, "Fred and Paul make a runway of those four heavy boards."

The two clowns laid the boards so that they stretched from the raft to the bank. Then Red took his place at the wagon tongue.

"Everybody at the wheels," shouted Red. "All ready? Now, as they say when the circus

comes to town, let's go! Heave! That's the gravy! Heave again!"

Axle grease, not gravy, enabled the spring wagon to roll smoothly down the improvised gangplank. Little Mex on the front seat shivered and looked up anxiously at King Richard, but the King remained dignified and unruffled; he had confidence in Sir Red of the Ready Wit. In a few minutes the wagon was on the raft, and the wheels were securely lashed to the logs.

Then came the trailer—that was the cat's roller skates; it rolled aboard like a can of peas, and then it, like the spring wagon, was lashed until it couldn't move. The heavy stuff followed. Fred and Skip carried the big tent between them; considering all the wound stripes it bore, it deserved a little assistance.

"Now," said Red, "somebody give me a hand with Duke."

Pen offered both hands, and by dint of coaxing and pulling they finally got the big horse aboard and tied him to the wagon. He didn't seem quite at ease, however, and cast frequent glances back at Silverheels, as if wondering why they should drown him and not the mule.

“Now for the jack,” said Red. “He’ll be easy enough.”

Had Red made a mistake? Silverheels seemed to think so; his eyes rolled uneasily, and his long ears lay straight back like the hair of the young man in the collar advertisements.

Red took hold of the bridle, and the mule showed his teeth; he was ten years old—you can tell by the rings. Pen went to help his leader, but changed his mind as Silverheels let him know that he was appropriately named.

“Why, Silverheels!” cried Red reproachfully. “To do a thing like that! Don’t you want to go on the picnic? Come on now — forward march!”

But the mule pulled back on the bridle and sat down on his haunches. He guessed he wasn’t an army mule!

Then Pen also got hold of the bridle, and the two boys pulled as if they would yank the poor creature’s head from his neck. Now no one, not even a mule, likes to lose his head. So Silverheels relaxed a bit and rose to all four feet so suddenly that Red and Pen sat down with a bang that rattled their teeth.

But they were up again in an instant. “Come

on!" cried Red. "Pull! Altogether now—heave!"

Thereupon the mule sat down again; it was his turn, and he wasn't going to be cheated out of it.

"Silverheels, you old fool!" cried Red, straining backwards on the bridle. "Giddap! Now—here you come! That's the boy! Oh, doggone a mule!"

"Poor Noah!" shrilled Tut from the wagon.

"Somebody," said Uncle George, looking at Paul and Fred, "might git behin' an' push."

The two clowns acted as if they didn't hear. At heart they were just a little pleased to see that Red had at last started something that he probably couldn't finish. So was Skip.

As for Pen, he let go the bridle. "No use, Red," he said. "We'll have to unload the stuff and make Silverheels help pull it five miles to the next bridge."

"Never!" said Red between his teeth. Then like a good general he changed his tactics. "Silverheels, old boy," he said in a soothing voice, "you're acting like a donkey. What's the matter with you? Don't you want to enter the ark? Maybe you're hungry." And he reached over

and pulled some grass, which he held temptingly in front of the mule's nose.

Silverheels gobbled it, perhaps for the reserve strength it would give him, and rose to his feet.

"Hey, Skip," Red called, "untie Duke and bring him here."

"What for?"

"I've got an idea. Paul and Fred, separate those planks just a little."

Skip untied Duke and led him back to land.

"Now," said Red, "help me hitch the two nags together."

In a few minutes the horse and the mule were hitched side by side. Red took hold of the bridles and without a word to either animal calmly led them across the gangplank and on the raft. Silverheels made not the slightest protest.

"Hurrah for Red Gilbert!" screamed the parrot.

"I was a dunce," said Red, "not to have thought of that before. Poor Silverheels was scared, all alone by himself. He'd lost confidence."

"Some boy!" muttered the 'darker admiringly.

"Are we all ready?" asked Red.

"Ready in jest about one-fif' of a second," re-

plied Uncle George and, reaching into the lining of his old felt hat for his corn-cob pipe, began deliberately to fill it.

Having taken about ten minutes to do that, he brought the motor-boat alongside, passed a heavy rope from the stern to the end of the raft and with many an intricate knot made it fast. Then he tinkered with the engine for ten more minutes, talking to it or to himself all the while.

“Got lots of gas?” inquired Pen.

“Bless you’ heart, yes. Why, dat li’l tank yonder done hold twenty-five gallions. You all wouldn’t b’lieve dat, now would you?”

Pen replied that he wouldn’t, and he meant what he said; the tank couldn’t have held more than five.

Zip! Spink! Putt—putt, putt—putt, putt! Uncle George jumped back as the engine started. “Eyah! Dat’s de baby! We’re off lak a shot!” He seized the wheel, and just then Red shouted:

“Wait! Wait! Don’t start yet!”

All eyes turned on Red, who was standing at the side of the trailer, looking off toward the road. Then all eyes turned in the direction in which he was looking. And there they saw a strange sight

—a sight that made poor Pen sit down on the logs and cover his face with his hands.

Coming down over a slight rise of ground, in single file, all in step and not glancing either to right or to left, were Erick, Fritz and Clarence and a strange cat that once had been white. No one aboard the raft spoke a word; no one *could* speak. The cats made no attempt to hurry; they didn't even blink an eye when a sparrow flew low and used insulting language. Coming to a rock, Erick leaped calmly over it; Fritz followed him; Clarence followed Fritz, and Whitey followed Clarence. Then they all proceeded as evenly as before.

“Well, doesn't that beat a carpet!” cried Red. “Say, are you cats playing follow-your-leader? Shake a leg now, or you'll miss the boat!”

But not a cat shook a leg. Straight down the hill they came, paused for an instant on the bank and then sprang aboard the raft—one, two, three, four. Just like that!

“The criminals have all returned,” said Tut, winking knowingly at Uncle George.

“Red,” said Pen dismally, “are you going to take 'em along—even that dirty powder puff they brought along?”

“Sure. Why not? I’m mighty glad to see them again. That’s right,” Red added to the three prodigals and their new-found friend, “get into the wagon out of sight. Maybe we’ll kill the fatted rat for you—and maybe not.”

The cats obeyed, but “out of sight, out of mind” meant nothing to Pen, whose face grew longer every minute; and, strange to say, Skip began to regain his lost spirits. “Where do you suppose the Three Musketeers have been?” he asked.

“Probably robbing babies of their cream,” replied Pen.

“No, I think you’re wrong, Penny,” said Skip. He held both hands out straight in front of him, and his face assumed its best fortune-telling look. “Ah, what is this I see as in a dream?”

“Ah don’t see nuffin,” said Uncle George, staring china-eyed across the river.

“Ah, I have it,” continued Skip. “Yes, yes, it is clear now. I see three cats picking their way along the streets of Union, silent, stealthy and endowed with one fell purpose. Hah! What is that? A dog! Zip, he is dead—chewed to pieces! Two more dogs—zip, they will bark no more! Still another—zip, every dog has his day!

Ha! What do I see now—four cats, not three; they are crossing a field toward a girls' camp. Zip, a sudden rush! Hair-ribbons flying! Bobbed hair bobbing! Shrill cries of 'I want him for a pet!' The cats have turned. They are running—running ——"

Just then Uncle George forgot what he was doing and started the engine with a succession of loud reports—and Skip came out of his trance.

"Good for you, Skip," said Red. "I'm glad to see you've forgotten the jinx."

"Don't need a jinx to spoil things when there's cats aboard," said Pen dolefully.

Uncle George's "li'l boat," like one of those New York Harbor tugs that escort an ocean liner out from the pier, pulled the heavily laden raft toward mid-channel. And since there was nothing more exciting to do, Red found an outlet for his energy by painting the prize motto on a board, "A Million Laughs per Minute"—rather a large order even for a silly hyena. Skip was sitting on the wagon seat, humming the chorus of a new song that he was to try on Dirksville. Paul and Fred were holding the bridles of the mule and the horse respectively, and Pen was sitting near the trailer, thinking of cats.

Red had just tacked the sign on the side of the wagon when the engine in the little motor-boat ceased to pop.

"Hello!" shouted Red. "What's wrong, uncle?"

"Ah never knew it to fail," replied the darky. "Ever' time Ah takes a party on de raf' mah li'l boat plays 'possum."

Red grinned. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

The old man looked blank. "Den you all wouldn't of hired me," he replied, showing that if necessary a preposition can be used also as a verb.

"Well, fix it quick," said Red. "We're drifting."

"Ah'll have it fixed in two winks!" said the old darky, and he went to work with hammer, screw-driver and greasy rag.

It seemed to be a long time between winks. Uncle George pounded and pried and wiped, but the engine remained as dead as Tut's great-great-grandfather. The bulky raft had turned in the current and, dragging the little boat, was drifting toward the gaunt pillars of the ruined bridge.

CHAPTER X

PEN was no longer thinking of cats; Skip's humming had changed to a whistle, but it was astonishingly dry, and Paul and Fred were glancing nervously over their shoulders. Silverheels, too, was nervous and was beginning to roll his eyes.

"Better hurry up there, Uncle George," shouted Red.

"Jest one secon'," replied the darky. " 'Tain't the carbon-eater; 'tain't the gas; 'tain't the oil; 'tain't the li'l ol' spark; 'tain't the ——"

"Well, what is it then?"

"Dat's jes' what Ah can't seem to dope out."

The middle pillar of the ruined bridge was only a score of yards off now, and they were heading straight for it.

"All hands prepare to fend off!" shouted Red. "You fellows had better stay with the nags," he added to Paul and Fred.

Pen and Skip joined Red at the forward end and waited anxiously. The raft had picked up considerable speed, and the pillar was only ten yards away.

“Sit down,” said Red, “and be ready to break the force of the blow with your feet.”

The three boys grasped the end logs and waited with legs outstretched. Five yards—three yards ——

“’Tain’t the perpeller shaf’,” muttered Uncle George. “’Tain’t the ——”

Bang! The big raft trembled under the blow, and Silverheels let out a shrill cry, which Tut tried to imitate as soon as he had picked himself up. The cats howled, and the royal mice squeaked. Little Mex shivered so hard his blanket came off—and then he shivered worse than ever.

Red, Skip and Pen, who had bounced a foot in the air at the impact, sprang up and pushed with all their strength against the stonework. The raft slewed round, scraped heavily against the pillar and continued on down-stream. Now there was another and greater danger; a hundred yards below and right in their course lay the partly submerged superstructure of the bridge. Among the bent and twisted struts and girders the river foamed and bubbled vindictively.

“Red, we’re lost!” cried Pen.

"Not yet!" cried Red. "Hey, Uncle George, hurry with that engine! Get it fixed!"

"'Tain't th' pistol rod," replied the darky, taking a turn with the screw-driver. At that instant the engine popped twice. "See, Ah done tol' you 'tain't the pistol rod!"

"Skip," said Red, "do you know anything about gas engines?"

"Not a thing. None of us does."

"Hey, uncle, do you need any help?" shouted Red.

"Oh, no. Ah'll have her a-buzzin' in less'n a secon'."

The remark was not very encouraging; there's such a thing as being too optimistic. Red and his companions waited with fast-beating hearts and watched the white water ahead coming closer and closer. There seemed to be nothing they could do. Even Red, resourceful as he had proved to be so far, wasn't a miracle man. What would happen when they struck the mass of wreckage? Would one of those upstanding girders scrape the wagon off? Or would they lodge securely in the tangle and starve to death like castaways on a desert island?

Red had given up all hope of help from the

motor-boat. Standing at the front of the raft, he frowned and bit his lips; his shock of light hair stood up at half a dozen different angles as if under the strain of his busy mind. Wasn't there something he could do? They were heading straight for the worst part of the stuff. Off to the left a few yards there was a break where apparently the iron was well under water—a narrow but open channel. If they could only turn the raft a bit!

“Skip! Pen!” Red whirled like a top. “Our one and only chance!”

“What is it?”

“Fish out those two soap boxes from the wagon—quick!” Then he ran to the other end of the raft; a glance over his shoulder told him that there were still about fifty yards of water between them and the submerged bridge.

At the back of the raft he untied the rope that held the motor-boat; it had been tied right in the centre of the stern. In a moment he was at the right-hand corner with it, where he made it fast.

At that instant Skip and Pen appeared with the two boxes; cat hairs on the inside showed who had been using them only a few moments before.



WASN'T THERE SOMETHING HE COULD DO? THEY WERE HEADING STRAIGHT FOR
THE WORST PART OF THE STUFF

“Get them into the water right here by this rope and hold hard!” cried Red.

Skip and Pen obeyed, but Skip looked up and asked: “What for?”

“They’ll act like a rudder,” replied Red, “they and the motor-boat dragging on this side.”

It was perfectly true, of course. The only question was, would they turn the raft enough? Red found a flat board that the cats had just chosen for a new bed and, using it as a paddle, took his place beside the two other helmsmen.

The raft was swinging to the left, ever so little, it is true, but the fact was a hopeful one.

“Work hard, fellows!” cried Red, taking furious back-strokes with the cat’s bed. “It’s sink or swim!”

Uncle George glanced up from the engine at that moment, and his eyes looked like a pair of black and white cuff-links. “How come dat rope yonder?” he asked.

But Red had no time for answering questions. As he worked he watched the narrow opening toward which they were slowly swinging. Fifteen yards from the first bit of wreckage he uttered a shout of triumph. “We’ll make it!

Stand ready to fend off! Paul and Fred, hold those nags when we bump."

Swiftly the current bore them downward. The raft poked her nose into the channel and shivered as submerged pieces of iron scraped the bottom. Then she struck amidships on the left side and turned slowly to the right in answer to the thrust. A blow on the right side sent her back where she belonged; and so she glided, zig-zagging her way down-stream. On either side the water boiled white; on either side sharp bits of iron thrust up their strong grotesque arms as if reaching for one of the animals. Onward—onward the raft bumped and quivered and scraped. And then ——

"Hurrah!" cried the five boys. "Safe!"

"Safe!" echoed the hollow voice of Tut Ankh Amen's great-great-grandson from beneath the hood of the wagon. "The umpire says so! Hurrah for Red Gilbert!"

The boys glanced back at the motor-boat. Uncle George was on his knees in the bottom; his face was almost white, and he seemed to be trying to restore the color by mopping his forehead with the greasy rag.

"All right back there?" shouted Skip.

“Ah—Ah don’t jest know. Ah’m wonderin’.”

“Any chance of getting the engine fixed?” asked Red.

Uncle George’s face brightened. “Ah’ll have dat li’l ol’ engine fixed in two shakes of a ram’s tail.”

But if it had been a long time between winks it was also a long time between shakes. Though Red and Pen and Skip did their best to steer the raft toward the opposite shore, the craft drifted three miles before Uncle George did the right thing, whatever it was, and the engine sputtered and then began to pop steadily.

“Ah done tol’ you!” exclaimed the old darky triumphantly.

“Sure you did,” replied Red; “but what’s that town down there by that other busted bridge?”

“Dat am Fisher’s Landin’.”

“Let’s land there,” said Red, readjusting the rope leading to the launch.

“Suits me, suh.” And Uncle George swung wide; the raft followed, and in half an hour they were moored safe along the bank above the place.

“What was wrong with the boat, uncle?” asked Paul.

“ Oh, nuffin—nuffin a-tall. Jest some li'l thing was wrong with the engine—engine trouble,” he added as if the phrase explained everything.

“ Well, now to get the stuff ashore,” said Red. “ All together, boys.”

Uncle George sat back and watched, and when wagon, trailer and all were on dry land he remarked: “ Ah don't know when Ah've had such fun. Ah likes to see folks work.”

Red laughed. “ How much do we owe you? ”

“ One buck,” replied the darky, “ jest one buck and whatever else you all sees fit to give me.”

Red took a five-dollar bill from the strong-box and held it out to him. “ Here you are,” he said—and grandness and generosity fought for first place in his voice—“ keep the change. We're extremely obliged to you.”

Off came the old man's hat, and out came his hand. “ Oh, suh, Ah couldn't think of takin' all dat money! ” And his fingers closed on the bill.

The last the boys saw of him he was on his way up to the village, probably to change the five into ones, the ones into halves, and the halves into quarters so as to have more silver to rattle.

“ What do you say to showing here, Red? ”

inquired Skip. "It's a good-looking town, and we can strike Dirksville to-morrow."

"Just what I was thinking. How about the rest of you?"

"Oh, all right, I guess."

"Fred," said Red, "suppose you take some posters under your fat little arms and go forward and find a place to pitch the tents."

When Fred had gone the others sat down on a flat stone, and Pen looked at Red. "Seems to me, Red," he said slowly, "we've had some extraordinary experiences since we left Twin Rapids."

At mention of Twin Rapids Red's face took on a rather wistful, far-off look, and Skip began to whistle a bar from the "Girl I Left Behind Me." Red coughed and glanced quickly at Pen. "What do you mean? I can't seem to think of anything extraordinary."

"You can't? How about the runaway right at the start? How about landing in a deserted town? How about that girls' camp affair? How about the storm at Union? How about this last little pleasure trip on a runaway raft?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Red. "Those things aren't so very unusual. Now supposing we'd all

been killed in that runaway? Or the dead town had been a hiding-place for bandits? Or suppose those girls had all wanted to kiss us? Or lightning had struck our horses at Union? Or the raft had sunk out there in mid-channel? Then we'd have had experiences worth while talking about!"

"How could we talk about 'em if we'd all been killed or drowned?" asked Pen.

"Oh, I didn't say *we'd* talk about 'em," replied Red with great composure. "Other people can talk, can't they?"

"Engine fixed in less'n a secon'," called the parrot as if to prove that he at least could talk.

Pen was silent for a few moments. Then he said: "Well, how about all the money we were to make? You said it would roll in!"

"How much have we on hand?" asked Red, suddenly serious.

"Twenty-five dollars and twenty-five cents, deducting that last five you gave Uncle George—why you had to give him as much as that I don't know; he'd have been satisfied with one dollar and a dime for a tip."

Red's face showed plainly what he thought of such niggardliness.

“Pen,” said Paul, “you haven’t made some mistake in your books, have you?”

“Of course not!”

“Well, in that case,” said Red, “we’ve got to hustle.”

“Well,” replied Pen, “I hope this is a good open-hearted, open-handed town.”

“So do I!” added Paul and Skip.

“Yes,” said Red, “I hope so, too!”

And just then Fred returned with all of his posters under his arm. “Fellows,” he cried almost savagely, “we can’t show here! The town authorities won’t allow it.”

CHAPTER XI

“THE town authorities won’t allow us to put on our show?” inquired Red skeptically.

“That’s it in an egg-shell,” replied Fred, throwing down his posters.

“Who told you that?” demanded Red.

“A policeman—a big fellow too! He said there’s a town ordinance against it.”

“Oh, doggone the doggone luck!” cried Pen and Skip.

“It’s an ironic stroke of Fate,” said Paul, remembering the phrase from a book he had once read.

“It gets my goat,” added Fred.

Then they all looked at Red, who began to laugh. “Fellows,” he said, “I don’t believe much in luck or Fate or goats. We’ll put our show on this afternoon.”

“How so, if they won’t let us?”

“Take the posters, Fred, and come with me,” replied Red. “Skip, you take charge and bring the outfit forward.”

“But, Red ——”

"Oh, don't worry," said Red. "Just do as I say. Come on, Fred." And he started up the hill.

"I don't see how you're going to do it," growled Fred, following like a dog.

Red paused and, taking one of the posters, tacked it on a tree.

When they reached the town he tacked two more on a fence, and grinned to himself as he watched the people stop to read.

"Red, you're going to get us all in trouble," said Fred gloomily.

Red tacked up a few more posters by way of reply.

"You're going to get us all in jail," said Fred, going naturally from bad to worse. "See, look! I told you! Here comes that same cop!"

Red finished tacking up another poster just as the big policeman arrived. "See here," said the officer, "we don't allow any vagabonds to put on shows in this town. Didn't I tell you that?" He looked sternly at Fred, who looked as guilty as he felt.

"We're not going to show inside the town," replied Red politely. "We plan to pitch our tents in the field yonder beyond the town limits."

"Oh," said the officer. "But what about these posters?"

"We'll tear 'em down if you say," replied Red.

"H'm. Yes, I guess you'd better."

"Run back and rip them off, Fred," said Red. "Tear 'em down and then tear 'em up."

Fred was only too glad to get away.

"I suppose there's no objection to our showing over there in the field, is there?" continued Red a few minutes later.

"No, but see that you don't try any funny business."

For a moment Red looked really pained; then he smiled, and just then too the wagon appeared over the hill. Red waved to Skip, who was driving; then he turned to the officer again. "I want to be perfectly sure everything is all right," he said. "We've never broken a law intentionally, and we don't aim to do so now."

"You're all right so long as you don't try any funny business," reiterated the officer. "Just remember that."

Red nodded gravely as if he quite understood. "Have you any youngsters?" he inquired.

"Six—all boys."

"If they care to see our show," said Red

casually, "they're welcome free of charge. Just have them ask for Mr. Redfield Gilbert."

The officer replied that his six boys were a whole circus in themselves, but that perhaps they might enjoy seeing others perform for once.

By that time the outfit was close at hand, and Red said good-by to the officer, whose name was Clubber, and joined Pen and Paul behind the trailer.

"What's the idea, Red?" asked Pen in a voice full of wonder.

"We'll just march through the town," replied Red, "and put on our show outside the limits."

"Huh," said Pen, "funny I didn't think of that, myself."

"You've got enough to do thinking of the books," replied Red sympathetically.

Down the main street moved the Flying Circus between fast-gathering spectators at either curb. Old Duke lifted his legs a little higher than usual and tossed his head like a thoroughbred. Silverheels flapped his long ears back and forth as if he were about to fly. Skip and the St. Bernard and the hairless hound on the front seat looked as if each were trying to see who could sit the straighter. At the back of the wagon swung the

royal mice, quite oblivious of the four pairs of feline eyes that were gleaming at them from the semi-darkness below the hood; and on the trailer with feathers all ruffled and eyes as bright as beads sat the parrot staring curiously at the crowds and remarking from time to time: "So this is Paris!"

It was the best kind of advertising, that slow and stately march through the town. There was no need of posters; there was no need of a brass band. Boys and girls joined arms and followed in the rear, like rats behind the Pied Piper; by the time Red called a halt in an open field well beyond the last house there was a crowd large enough to have elected a new mayor—say in a dozen years when they had all reached the voting age. And in the crowd were six boys that Red at once spotted.

They ranged in age from perhaps five to fourteen, and if they had all stood in a row, their heads would have made a perfect flight of stairs. They all had astonishingly large feet and hands, and each carried a stick with a piece of string tied to it and wrapped round his wrist. Of course they were the six young Clubbers.

Red called the oldest to him. The boy pulled

his cap down over his eyes and advanced as if he were on his way to a fire; his five brothers advanced right at his heels.

"You're Mr. Clubber's boys, aren't you?" said Red.

"Yep," replied the oldest.

"Do you want to see our show?"

"Yep," replied all six Clubbers.

"Well," said Red, "all you'll have to do is to stand inside the tent during the performance and sort of see that the spectators don't make any trouble. That ought to be easy."

The oldest Clubber twirled his stick rapidly. "If anyone starts any funny business," he said emphatically, "we'll knock him for a goal!"

"Knock him for a row of goals," added the youngest, twirling his stick.

"That's the spirit," said Red.

In five minutes the company were hard at work putting up the tents. And as they worked, the young Clubbers divided forces and stalked importantly up and down in front of the onlookers, just to make sure that no one "started any funny business" before the show began.

Meanwhile Paul had gone back to the town; when he returned he carried a sack of peanuts and

a package of paper bags, which he began to fill and sell for five cents apiece.

When the tents were up things looked promising. Red had on his high silk hat and carried his long whip at a professional angle. Skip was arrayed in his flowing robes, and soon the money was flowing into the small tent in response to his glimpses of the future. He invited the Clubbers to come and have their fortunes told, but the oldest replied that he didn't dare leave his beat or allow any of his "men" to go either. However, they all accepted a little graft in the form of peanuts, which they ate slyly, as if afraid of being caught at it.

Then Red slapped the side of the big tent with his whip and began to bark: "Step right up, ladies and gentlemen. The greatest show on earth including Fisher's Landing. Don't be bashful, ladies; the gents have the money. That's right, step inside. A million laughs per minute—and the shows lasts an hour and a half. Figure it out for yourselves! I leave it to you, ladies and gentlemen!"

"Fred," said Paul as with brush and paint the two were making clowns of themselves behind a curtain in the small tent, "it looks to me as if

we're going to make a successful go of it this time."

"That's how I feel, Paul," said Fred. "Nothing can possibly upset things this time."

It must be remembered that Fred and Paul were both clowns; their opinions therefore were superficial—a bit like vaseline on a creampuff. Another surprise was in store for the Flying Circus—and out under the hood of the wagon Whitey, the fourth cat, was thinking it over.

CHAPTER XII

Now Whitey wasn't a blue-ribbon cat by a jugful; his history was very doubtful. He had been born—somewhere, and he was hungry. He had moved—somewhere, and he was hungry. He had grown into cathood—and he was hungry. He had run away from home to make his fortune—and he was hungrier than ever. Then he had joined the Musketeers—and he was still hungry. That is Whitey's history, and as he lay there in the wagon he was pondering the eternal problem, how should he keep his ribs from becoming too familiar with one another?

He heard Red Gilbert in the big tent make his opening speech, heard the cheers and hand-clapping that followed it. He heard Skip sing three or four songs and then heard him sing his new composition as an encore. Whitey didn't like it, and no wonder, for it ran like this:

“ Little cat, all black and white,
I'd love you if you'd treat me right.
I'd buy you catnip by the yard
And grease your little throat with lard.

But pussy, dear, all white and black,
I hate the way you stroke my back;
So, little cat, all black and white,
I think I'll drown you—just for spite!”

The roar of applause that shook the tent showed Whitey just how popular cats were; and so he resumed his pondering. He was gloomier than ever; not knowing that all the animals would be fed right after the show, he thought perhaps the circus men intended to starve him. And so his mind turned to thoughts of food again.

He heard the two clowns slapping merrily away at each other, urged on by the shrill cries of the parrot. Then Pen came to the wagon and, waking Erick, Fritz and Clarence, carried them off to do their stunt.

Whitey got up and stretched himself. He had decided to run away again, but as he jumped down from the wagon the first thing he spied was a large can that once had contained salmon. It was an old can, but remember Whitey was pretty hungry. He made a savage rush for it and thrust his head inside. To his horror and consternation the thing stuck; he couldn't withdraw his head. Talk about a chicken with its

head cut off—a cat with its head fast in a salmon can is much worse!

Poor Whitey started to run, but stopped short as the can clanked against a stake. Lying on his back in the dirt, he clawed at the gold-fish can with all four feet. No use at all! He turned half a dozen somersaults in rapid succession. He spat; he snarled; he caterwauled—all of which was so much canned music.

At that moment the youngest Clubber, attracted by the noise, issued forth from beneath the side of the tent; his cap was pulled down over his eyes—so far down in fact that he tripped on one of the many ropes and sprawled half a yard from poor Whitey with his tin gas mask. Up sprang the cat and started away like a spitball from a rubber band. Up sprang young Clubber and, heedless of a rather prominent nosebleed, started after the cat.

Whitey struck the side of the tent, bounced back and then sprang blindly upward. His sharp claws sank into the canvas, and up, up, up he went—up the side, then up the sloping top to the end of the pole. For the moment he was safe.

Young Clubber was vexed; a culprit had escaped his clutches. For a few moments he stood

frowning up at the cat, which was trying to get the can off and at the same time keep from falling through the opening in the canvas round the pole. Then the young sleuth gravely took a brass key from his pocket, blew on it to cool it and held it at the back of his neck—a sure cure for nose-bleed, if you hold the key there long enough. But young Clubber was an impatient lad; after a few moments of vain waiting he put the key into his pocket and applied a handkerchief to his nose. Then, doubtless with some great idea in his active young mind, he started inside the tent.

Red was holding a hoop, through which the Three Musketeers were jumping one after another. The big St. Bernard and the little hairless hound were sitting on a box side by side, watching the performance, and the parrot was at his favorite pastime of praising Red Gilbert and insulting the cats. The spectators were leaning forward eagerly, applauding frequently as the cats went through the hoop at difficult angles. And just then young Clubber with one hand over his nose and the other twirling his stick strode inside and walked to the tent pole.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” exclaimed Red, startled at sight of the young sleuth’s face.

The boy's answer was to seize the pole with both hands and shake it till he looked as if he had half a dozen heads and a dozen hands. The spectators were abruptly silent; then they gasped.

Whitey was shaking at the can of salmon when the boy began to shake the pole. The result was inevitable. The cat lost his balance and catapulted downward; he bounced off the boy's chest, turned a somersault and began to run.

Some of the girls screamed. King Richard began to bark, and little Mex began to shiver. It was terrible!

Round and round the ring raced the canned cat, bumping into benches, clawing indiscriminately at patent leather pumps and silk stockings. Round and round raced the youngest Clubber, followed closely by his five brothers. Then the boy fell. When he got to his feet he was half a lap behind; so he turned and ran the other way.

And that was the end. As Whitey came round again the boy waited and, dropping to his knees, gathered the runaway into his arms. In a moment he had removed the cat's false face.

The spectators drew a long breath. Some of the girls who had been on the point of having hysterics changed their minds and reached for

their powder puffs with the little mirrors inside. "It's a shame to treat a ninercent cat like that!" exclaimed one girl. "It's that Red Gilbert," said another; "he's too fresh!" And there were other remarks too!

Holding Whitey by the slack of the neck, young Clubber advanced toward Red, who with misgivings had been listening to some of the unflattering remarks about himself. "Mr. Gilbert," said the boy, "here's the cat. What'll I do with it, take it out an' drowned it?"

"Shame! Shame!" sounded several voices. "Shame on you, Red Gilbert!"

With a face as solemn as a judge's Red took the cat from the boy and thanked him. "Go out to the side tent," he said in an undertone, "and ask the fortune teller for a can of condensed milk and a saucer; then bring them to me."

The boy walked out like a striking bricklayer.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Red, mounting his keg and holding the cat as tenderly as if it were a baby, "I want to say first of all that this unfortunate incident was not a part of our show—at least not a prearranged part. I know that some of the ladies were startled, perhaps even frightened ——"

There were a few loud contemptuous sniffs on the part of several girls who had been well on their way toward hysterics.

"I am sorry for them," continued Red, stroking Whitey's back, "but I am more sorry for the cat. Poor Whitey!" he added, stroking the cat very tenderly.

"Hot dog!" exclaimed a small boy near the entrance.

Red looked at him sternly. All five Clubbers turned and glared at the offender and then glanced inquiringly at Red; but Red stayed them with a movement of his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he continued, "little Whitey here is the newest member of our circus. Yesterday he was homeless, utterly destitute, living on scraps from the garbage heap, kicked about from pillar to post, and then back again from post to pillar. A pathetic creature surely! He had developed thieving ways; he had learned a thousand and one bad habits and was going rapidly from bad to worse. Out of pity I gave him a home."

Two of the girls sighed, and with a little satisfied feeling Red moistened his lips and continued: "I said I gave him a home, but really

the whole credit belongs, not to me, but to three of our most talented performers, namely Erick, Fritz and Clarence, whom you have just seen jump through the hoop. In their wanderings—for we allow our animals to go and come pretty much as they please—they happened upon this poor, destitute, wayward creature. All three as you have seen are highly intelligent, and you can well imagine the compassion they felt for him. They brought him home with them—— Oh, ladies and gentlemen, if you could only have seen how willingly he came!”

A little murmur of sympathy rippled through the audience, and not all of it was for Whitey.

“How the poor little thing got its head caught in a tin can,” continued Red, “is more than I can say. Probably we’ll never know.”

Just then the youngest Clubber entered with an opened can of condensed milk in one hand and an empty saucer in the other.

“Ah,” said Red, “that’s the boy. Now run and get a spoon.”

The boy went out and returned immediately, and Red sat down on the keg. Holding the cat firmly under his left arm, he balanced the saucer in his lap. Filled with his own importance,

young Clubber poured the milk into the dish, and Red ladled up a spoonful. Then began the funniest performance of the day.

Tears and laughter are pretty close neighbors, and no one knew it better than Red. As Whitey lapped the first spoonful all the girls except one, who was having a rather bad case of hiccoughs, exclaimed: "Ah, just see that now! How cunning!"

Then, having sympathized, they were ready to laugh. The third spoonful Red offered he tipped a little more than was necessary, and Whitey emerged with white whiskers all dripping and joined together so that they looked like a little spider's web.

Spasmodic laughter filled the great tent, punctuated by frequent hiccoughs from the girl who had them.

Another spoonful and Whitey could have caught flies without opening his mouth. More laughter and louder hiccoughs. Then as Red gravely drew forth his pocket handkerchief and began carefully to mop off the cat's face it looked for a few moments as if all the spectators would laugh themselves into convulsions.

Red was popular again, and he knew it. For

fully twenty minutes he continued to feed the cat with a spoon. Then something happened that added to everyone's delight except that of the youngest Clubber. As he was kneeling beside Red and preparing to pour more milk into the half-filled saucer he accidentally knocked the dish off Red's lap into his own.

"Eyah!" he cried in disgust, springing to his feet and looking helplessly at the milk, which was running, or rather crawling, down his pants' leg.

That was too much for the spectators. They howled and screamed. The boys especially were so pleased that they had to punch one another in the ribs. The girl with hiccoughs got up and ran screaming and hiccoughing from the tent, closely followed by two others, who had caught the malady and seemed bent on keeping it.

Red with his handkerchief did as much for the young sleuth as he had done for the cat, and Pen came in with a basin of water to add to the troubled situation. As he mopped and sponged, Red took the opportunity to carry the cat back to the wagon. Whitey had done enough for his country for one afternoon!

At the end of the show, which came after Creampuff and Vaseline had again made life mis-

erable for each other, Red slipped outside and watched the crowd as they issued from the tent; and he said to himself that the performance had been tremendously successful. Some of the people were whistling bars from the songs that Skip had sung; some were imitating the antics of the two clowns; but most of them were laughing over the incident of the cat, the condensed milk and "that fresh little Clubber cub," who had allowed the milk to sit in his lap. Yes, the performance had been highly successful, but Red shuddered as he thought how close it had come to being otherwise.

Pen was counting the money in the small tent; there seemed to be a great deal of it—so much indeed that he felt discouraged and rather weak as he thought of balancing it. Well—"Twenty-five and ten is thirty-five and twenty is ——"

"Cheer up, Pen," said Fred, scraping away at the paint on his face; "it's good practice for your make-up exam in the fall."

"And twenty is—is eighty-five—and fifty is ——"

"Funny about Red and the cat," said Paul. "Huh, Pen?"

"Uh-hu; and fifty is three dollars and thirty-

five." Pen scratched his head and entered the amount in his book. "Guess that's right. Now fifteen and fifteen are thirty and five ——"

"Gee, that looks like a lot of money, Pen!"

"Makes forty-five. Say, you guys be quiet, will you?"

All of which goes to show that when it came to bookkeeping Pendleton Clark could carry a hod with the best of them.

By the time Skip had gone into the town and had returned with supplies the clerical work was in awful shape. Even Red couldn't straighten it out; at least he said he couldn't do it before midnight, and that he didn't intend to stay up so late as that.

"Let's all turn in, fellows," he said. "We want to reach Dirksville early to-morrow."

As the boys were spreading their blankets there came a slap, slap on the side of the tent.

"Who is it?" asked Red.

The flap lifted a trifle, and there stood the oldest Clubber. "Mr. Gilbert?" he inquired.

"Keerect!" replied Red. "Now what?"

"I was passin'," said the boy, "and I heard you say something about showing at Dirksville to-morrow. I came to warn you not to."

The boy hesitated a moment, and Red rose and went outside. "Tell me what's wrong," he said in a low voice.

The oldest Clubber looked wise; then he whispered something in Red's ear.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Red.

"Yep. It's so—ab-so-lute-ly! You'd better not show there."

"Well," said Red slowly, "I'm glad you told me. Here, as the Irish soldier said when he threw the grenade, divide this among you." And the bill that Red slipped into the boy's hand crackled to the tune of five dollars—which probably meant that one of the six Clubbers would be out of luck on the division.

"What's wrong, Red?" demanded his companions when he reëntered the tent. "Why oughtn't we to show at Dirksville?"

Red merely shrugged his shoulders. "We'll show at Dirksville to-morrow all right," he said and flung himself on his blankets.

CHAPTER XIII

THE parrot was the first one awake the following morning. He combed his hair with a shake of his head. He washed his face by brushing his wing across it, once. Cleaning his teeth was simple—he didn't have any. Having completed his modest toilet, he imitated a bugle and began to blow reveille. Then he began to talk; he had learned some new words the day before:

“Pen, you dumb-bell! Oh, gee, I can't straighten the accounts! Money, money, money—oh, what a mixed up mess!”

Pen awoke and glared at him; he had been dreaming of his muddled accounts all night long. “Shut up, you fool bird!” he exclaimed.

“Shut up, yourself!” replied Tut.

Pen was reaching for his shoe when Red opened his eyes and yawned.

“Saved!” cried the parrot. “Good-morning, Red!”

“Good-morning, Tut,” replied Red gravely. Then, “Everybody up! Come on, fellows, shake a leg!”

“Shake a leg!” shrilled the parrot.

And so began another day for Red Gilbert's Flying Circus.

"Now, Pen," said Red, "let me go over those accounts while the rest of you cook breakfast and feed the animals."

"Want any help?" asked Pen.

"No," said Red, and he meant it.

He sat down on one of the benches and, opening the strong-box, began to count the money. Then he went over Pen's figures. In fifteen minutes he had everything straight—all of which is proof of what a good night's sleep will do for a fellow.

"Well, boys," said Red as he ate his breakfast with the others, "yesterday was a great day. I'm here to announce that we have a surplus of one hundred and six dollars and fifteen cents! Though of course we owe Judge Mudge that hundred."

"Hurrah!" cried Skip. "Oh, boy, we're on our feet at last!"

"I can already see that bath-house!" said Paul.

"Red, you're some little banker!" said Pen admiringly. "How did you figure it all out so quickly?"

“ Oh, just by adding correctly,” replied Red, and Pen’s face and neck turned crimson—fortunately, he didn’t have on a celluloid collar.

Fisher’s Landing was rubbing the sleep out of its tired eyes when the wagon and trailer pulled out of the field and started south toward Dirksville. No one was on hand to wave farewell, not even the energetic Clubbers. Probably they were fighting over the five-dollar bill.

Red was uncommonly silent as he hiked along beside Pen behind the trailer. Pen glanced at him frequently; there was always something in the wind when Red wouldn’t talk. Pen was worried.

“ Say, Red,” he asked at last, “ what in Bagdad is the matter with you? What did that kid say to you last night? Why did he warn us not to show at Dirksville? And if something’s wrong, why are we going there? ”

“ Pen, old boy,” said Red solemnly, “ I think you’d make a better lawyer than a bookkeeper.”

And that was all the satisfaction Pen or anyone else could get.

Finally Red’s mouth twisted into an odd little smile; he had run down his idea at last, had backed it into a corner and then had swallowed

it. Two minutes afterward he had thoroughly digested it. He turned now to Pen. "It's a great day, don't you think?"

"Well, by gosh, it's about time you came out of your shell, you old crab!"

Red grinned. "There's a town at the foot of the hill," he remarked. "Tell Paul to watch his brakes and go slow; it's a bad road. We don't want to arrive like a prairie schooner chased by Indians."

In response to the warning Paul pulled the nags in and applied his brakes even more than was necessary. As a result half-way down Silverheels balked and let fly both feet in the direction of Paul's chin.

"Wait a minute!" cried Red, running forward. "No, don't use the whip!"

But Paul was a hot-tempered clown. No one, not even a mule, was going to try to kick him in the chin and get away with it. Down came his whip on the place to which the mule's hind legs were attached.

Swish! Away started Silverheels on a mad run. Sque-e-e-ak! sounded the brakes. Then, *bang!* Cra-a-ck! And mule, horse, wagon, trailer and everything stopped short.

“Oh!” cried Red. “Paul, you boob, now you’ve gone and done it!”

Fred and Pen and Skip sent up a groan and dropped disgustedly in the ditch beside the road.

Paul sprang from his seat. “What do you mean—boob! What have I gone and done ——”

He was abruptly silent. There was his answer. In front of him the rear of the covered wagon sagged like a porch hammock on a moonlight night. The back axle had snapped!

The silence that followed was more eloquent than a thousand shrieking cats. But all silences must be broken, and Pen was the destructive lad in this case. “One hundred and six dollars and fifteen cents to the good,” he said almost tearfully, “and then a thing like this has to happen! Paul, you ought to be boiled in oil and then be heaved over a cliff; you’re no good.”

“Huh,” said Paul, “how about the mule?”

“There’s only one mule here,” replied Pen witheringly, “and I just said what ought to be done to him.”

“Huh,” said Paul, “maybe ——”

“Never mind,” Red interrupted him. “Forget about the cause. This is just another unfortunate accident.”

“ So unfortunate,” added Pen, “ that it’ll probably set us back a hundred bucks! ”

“ In that case,” said Red, laughing, “ we’ll still be six dollars and fifteen cents to the good. Come on, Pen, you and I will go down to the village and see if we can find someone to fix the thing. Better unhitch the nags, Skip.”

Fortunately, the village boasted a carpenter shop, and the carpenter, when Red and Paul found him and told him of their trouble, boasted that he could fix anything that was broken—except of course an engagement.

“ Where’s your wagon, and how bad is the axle broke? ” he asked, picking up his kit of tools as a doctor would pick up his medicine case.

“ Just outside of town,” replied Red. “ But first, how much will it cost? ”

“ Young feller,” replied the man solemnly, “ there ain’t another carpenter in town, and there ain’t another town in six miles. I’ve got what ye might call a monopoly.”

“ And therefore,” said Red, “ you can charge what you please.”

“ Presactly—but I’ll try an’ be fair.” The man’s tone suggested that it might be pretty hard.

“Ah-ha!” he exclaimed, on reaching the wagon. “A busted axle!”

“Right the first time!” said Red under his breath. “I picked the right man!”

“Now just let me overhaul the whole wagon. A busted axle usually means a few sprung spokes. Yep, just what I thought. And a sprung spoke often means a strained hub—yep, two of 'em. And a strained hub many times means a sagging spring—yep, see how that spring yonder sags like it was tired? A sagging spring nine cases out o' ten means a loose body—yep, see? What did I tell ye? And a loose body—yep, just as I thought. My, my, yer wagon's in bad shape! Just let me give it a *thorough* examination.”

Indeed having the broken axle fixed was much like going to the dentist's to have a cavity filled; before the carpenter was through examining he had found a score of things that needed repair. “Now how about yer trailer?” he asked. “I'd better inspect it.”

“The trailer is all right,” said Red quickly.

“Ye never can tell till ye look,” replied the man. “Folks ought to have their furniture and stuff looked at every six months, just like a sen-

sible person goes to the sawbones twice a year whether he feels sick or not."

"The trailer is in perfect health," said Red.

The carpenter looked doubtful; nevertheless he went to work on the broken axle. He hammered and banged for a few minutes; then he had everyone unload the wagon. After that he sent Fred and Paul to the village to fetch a jack and a new axle from his shop. By the time they returned Red and the others had pitched the small tent under a convenient tree.

"Now," said the carpenter, "you boys give me a hand and help me jack her up and take off the wheels. That's the way."

When the jack, not to mention Fred and Paul and Skip, had lifted the wheels clear of the ground the man spat on his hands. "Say," he demanded, "what kind of a outfit is this? Looks to me like a circus. Are ye going campin'?"

"It is a circus," replied Red. "Funny how you guessed it."

"Oh, I can spot 'em," said the carpenter. "Where ye aimin' to show at?"

"Dirksville," said Red.

"Dirksville!" repeated the man. Then he began to laugh. He slapped his knee; he doubled

up like a jack-knife—or a pretzel; he choked and sputtered and roared. “Dirksville!” he cried. “Yer a-going to show at Dirksville! Oh, my! Oh, my!”

“What’s wrong with the place?” demanded Skip. “Do they all carry dirks there?”

“Dirksville!” repeated the carpenter, as if the word tickled not only his fancy but his ribs as well. Then he began to laugh again.

CHAPTER XIV

RED had walked a little apart from the others and had begun to talk to Tut. Now his companions joined him. "Red," said Pen, "what the dickens is all this funny mystery about Dirksville? What's this fellow laughing his head off about, and what did that Clubber kid mean last night when he warned us not to show there?"

"Oh, nothing much," replied Red.

"Well," said Pen slowly, "we've made up our minds, Red, that we're not going a step farther till you've told us."

Tut rolled his eyes at the carpenter. "A little axle grease on that elbow; then a little elbow grease on the axle!"

Red grinned. "Pen," he said, "will you all promise to go on and show there if I do tell you?"

"We'll go anywhere you go," was the dignified reply, "but we've got a right to know."

"Well, I guess you have," said Red. "The truth is, fellows, that—have you ever heard of Darling's Five Ring Circus?"

"Sure. Who hasn't?"

“Well,” continued Red, “they’re showing at Dirksville now and will be there all next week. Now you know.”

Red’s companions looked at one another blankly. The carpenter had at last coughed up his last “Dirksville” and was pounding away at the old axle. For fully two minutes that was the only sound to be heard.

Then, “Red,” said Skip, “are you crazy?”

It had been some time since Red had had to answer that embarrassing question, but he didn’t hesitate. “Oh, no,” replied Red in mock astonishment. “Why?”

“Because you want to go to Dirksville and compete with one of the biggest shows in America.”

“But not the greatest,” replied Red.

His companions looked at him hopelessly. At last Pen ventured to ask: “How are you going to do it?”

“I’m not quite sure,” said Red easily. “But I’m convinced of this: a little competition is what we need. I’m afraid we’ve grown a bit stale.”

“I’d rather be a stale crust than a loaf of fresh bread that gets eaten,” said Fred, a bit surprised at himself for thinking of such a bright metaphor.

"I'd rather be a fresh loaf that takes first prize at the fair," said Red.

"Well," added Skip, "I'll say you've got plenty of crust to start with."

"If you'll pardon the seeming lack of modesty," replied Red, grinning, "I think it's pretty good crust."

Just then the carpenter called for help, and there the argument ended.

For the next three hours everybody worked on the axle. Red told the carpenter that he knew all about Darling's circus being at Dirksville and added that it didn't make much difference—Darling was out of luck, that was all.

"Ye don't mean yer goin' to compete against 'em, do ye?" the man asked incredulously.

"My friend," said Red, "do you suppose that Darling's circus ever showed at a town where every solitary resident, old and young, big and little, turned out the first night?"

"Not likely," replied the carpenter.

"Well," said Red, "we've had that distinction."

The carpenter was floored; he had no reply, so he contented himself by planning to tack five dollars extra on the bill. He belonged to no

union; nevertheless he stopped work and went home for dinner at ten minutes of twelve.

When he returned he had a friend with him—man's best friend, as a matter of fact, a large hound. The two clowns and Pen and Skip glanced once at the creature and inwardly thanked their stars they didn't have such a dog to live with. Red glanced once at him and decided the outfit would be incomplete without him.

"That's a miserable specimen of a brute you've got," he said to the man. "Do you call it a dog?"

"I call him a varmut," replied the carpenter. "Look at him sitting there—a hide like sandpaper, a head like a hammer, legs like a brace an' bit, ribs like slats on a crate ——"

"I should think you'd be ashamed to own him."

"Huh," said the carpenter; he evidently hadn't thought of the great moral side of the matter.

"What's his name?"

"Gloom," replied the man.

"He looks it." Red regarded the creature thoughtfully.

He was one of those unfortunate dogs that seem to be ashamed to live. He wasn't any color

at all; he wasn't any shape at all. A bleached and stained burlap bag half filled with bones and draped over a bush would have passed easily for his twin. His feet were big and clumsy, and his legs looked like those of Old Man Rheumatism's dog. His tail was bent as if from being kicked, and it seemed twice as thick as it was because of the many burrs matted into it. His eyes were bloodshot, and the skin round them was wrinkled and moth-eaten. His ears hung down almost to the dust, and the ends were sliced to ribbons—showing that in his day he had mingled in fast feline company. Altogether he was the saddest dog Red had ever seen.

But Red saw something else—something that none of the others had noticed. He had looked full into Gloom's great brown eyes, and he had seen, besides deep abiding sadness, loyalty and compassion. Gloom knew suffering as few dogs know it; he could appreciate a real friend. Red was determined to have him.

“Is he vicious?” he inquired.

“All varmut is vicious,” replied the carpenter, and, not content with letting the boy draw the logical conclusion, he stooped and picked up a stone. A deep growl issued from the depths

of the bag of bones, and the dog's teeth flashed in the sunlight.

The carpenter hastily dropped the stone. "Teeth like chisels!" he said.

"Better look out," said Red. "Some day he'll chew your leg off. You couldn't very well kick him after that, you know."

The man was very thoughtful as he spread out his tools. "Wish I could get rid of him," he said at last.

"I wish you could too!" said Red compassionately. "You'd probably earn more money without him; folks are usually shy of a man who owns a mutt like that."

"I guess that's so. But who'd take him?"

Red seemed to consider. "Well, now," he said at last, "I'll tell you what I'll do if you like. I'll take him along with me."

"Yer not foolin'?"

"No; I'll do it as a favor."

"He's yours!" said the carpenter.

And that's how Red Gilbert's Flying Circus acquired a "varmut."

While his companions stood in frowning silence Red walked over to the dismal hound and, without the least show about it, patted his great

hammer head and called him a good dog. The hound responded by licking his hand, and from that moment Red was his master.

Along toward four o'clock the carpenter finished with the new axle, and with the air of a man who has secured a life job out of jail started work on the spring; but Red stopped him. "We'll call it a day," he said.

"Want me to come to-morrow?" the carpenter asked hopefully. "Fix you up in two more days—fifteen dollars a day."

"No. We're all set."

"But what if yer spring breaks?"

"By that time," said Red, "we'll probably be where there's more than one carpenter. How much does a new axle cost?"

"That one's twenty-two dollars."

"Then we owe you thirty-seven dollars—twenty-two plus fifteen."

The man looked crestfallen; plainly he had expected to get more than that, but Red had him in a vise. "You won't get far on that spring," the fellow contented himself with saying.

"Well, we'll see," said Red. "Pen, open up the strong-box, and we'll pay our debts."

When the carpenter had gone Red's compan-

ions held an indignation meeting. "It's an outrage!" cried Pen. "His charging that much!"

"And Red went and paid him like a little lamb," said Fred.

"And look at the mutt the fellow left behind!" said Skip.

"Fellows," said Red earnestly, "you've got the wrong idea. As times are, we've paid a fair price. Besides, we've got a prize dog! Did you ever see a dog like that before in your life?"

"Never!" It was unanimous.

"Well, what's a circus for if it isn't to show strange and unusual animals?" demanded Red.

"Maybe you're right," said Skip thoughtfully.

"Sure I am," said Red. "And I've got a new idea too that I hope will be ripe by morning. Let's feed now and prepare to spend the night right here."

The boys cooked supper, but even after they had crowded their stomachs with baked beans, rice and raisins and crackers and cocoa there was a noticeable lack of harmony in the camp. Red's companions were uncertain about the morrow; moreover, they were uncertain about Red's dog. If the brute should decide to act as bad as he

looked, the Flying Circus might come to a sudden and disastrous end.

No one knew what Red knew: that a subtle change had come over the dog. At last he had found the one master, and henceforth he was on his good behavior. But true as the circumstance was, Red couldn't convince his friends of it; they slept that night each of them with a club beside his bed.

Morning dawned as mornings have had a way of doing for a good many years. Mother of Pearl played her pretty shell game with the eastern sky; the heavens changed from sedate gray to pink and rose and presently to brooding blue. And then the sun came up with a bump, rejoicing like a strong man to run a race—and incidentally promising to make it hot for anyone he caught napping.

But as far as Red and his companions were concerned, Old Sol was a slowpoke. They were already passing through the village when he appeared. At that hour the place was deserted except for one person, the carpenter. He was sitting on the wide porch of the general store with his back against a post. While the spring wagon was yet thirty yards off he fixed his eyes

on the back spring and began to shake his head dubiously from side to side; and as he did so he made strange noises with his lips—something like those a hen makes that had rather set than dig bait.

The boys nodded to him pleasantly enough, but he continued to wag his head and cluck prophetically; it almost seemed as if the spring sagged visibly under the spell. Red, who was driving, looked back as they reached the top of the next hill—and there the fellow still sat, hoping and praying for the worst. Skip set the incident down as an ill omen, but he didn't say anything.

And where was Gloom all the while? Curled up between King Richard and the hairless hound! He had made friends with everyone except the cats and Red's four companions.

Shortly before noon Red halted the team just outside the town of Dirksville, and there they all had lunch.

"Now, fellows," said Red, "do you see those splashes of white ahead in what looks like a park? I suspect they're Darling's tents."

His companions nodded unenthusiastically.

"I'm afraid," continued Red, "that we're

likely to have a trying time at first when we enter the town."

"No doubt about it," said Pen. "We usually do."

"Folks will laugh at us," Red went on. "They'll yell and hoot and say all the funny things they can think of. Now what we've got to do is take it all in good fun. Remember, Americans like fair play, and we'll get it if we all act like good sports. I've taught Tut to say 'Hurrah for Dirksville!' And whenever I say, 'Now, boys!' all of us will give the same yell. That'll get 'em. Another thing, we'll have a parade."

"A parade!" exclaimed his companions. "When, where?"

"We'll form," replied Red, "at the foot of the hill and parade right down the main street. A big town like Dirksville is sure to have a couple of schoolhouses; I hope to use the front yard of one of them to show in."

"Red," said Skip, "you've certainly got nerve!"

"What kind of a parade will it be?" asked Paul.

"I'd call it the Parade of the Nations," said

Red. "Pen will drive. King Richard will go on ahead; then comes Tut on the trailer; then the four cats hitched behind in single file; then Fred dressed as Creampuff; then little Mex; then Skip in his flowing robes; then Paul as Vaseline carrying the royal mice and leading Gloom."

"It'll never work out," said Pen positively.

"Yes, it will!" retorted Red. "Didn't I lie awake for an hour last night, planning the thing? Of course it'll work out!"

"But where do the nations figure in it?" inquired Paul.

"Ah-ha!" cried Red. "Now you've hit the nail on the thumb! Just as soon as we've cleared up this grub I'll show you something else that I planned during that wakeful hour—something that'll open your eyes!"

CHAPTER XV

WHAT Red showed his four companions made them open their mouths as well as their eyes. And one hour later the whole town of Dirksville did the same.

It was a great day for a parade, just warm enough, just cool enough. The road that led into the town and, once inside, became Centre Street, was lined on either side with old maple trees, and down that picturesque green and gold-splashed avenue, half an hour later, marched Red Gilbert's Flying Circus.

First, big, powerful, stately and dignified came the St. Bernard. From his collar protruded a little silk American flag that someone back in Twin Rapids—never mind who—had given to Red. The dog seemed to feel his importance, for he held to the centre of the road and lifted his feet with dignity and grace. He was America and knew it.

Close behind came Red, himself, arrayed in his war paint and high hat. His eyes were fixed on the group of surprised and wondering townsfolk

who were gathered at the first house on the outskirts. He smiled to himself as he saw the group swell and become a small crowd as people ran to join it. It was proving to be a great summer for Red.

Then came the wagon and trailer with Pen driving. Old Duke and Silverheels were draped and adorned with gay bits of cloth and ribbons that had been cut from nobody knows where. Funny what a little show and excitement will do for man or animal; those two nags seemed to be walking on air, and their nostrils flared like thoroughbreds'. And even the old wagon seemed to have caught the holiday spirit. The boys had plastered the sides with posters till it looked as if all the fun in the world had been condensed and crowded under the brown hood. At any rate the slogan, "A Million Laughs per Minute," enhanced that impression. And there behind on the trailer, mysterious and at the moment silent like the sphinx, sat the Egyptian parrot. A little placard attached to his foot and hanging down over the side bore the words "Egypt—keep it dark!"

There was a shout, then a cheer from the crowd as King Richard came opposite them. Several

men took off their hats as the dog marched past with Red's flag—or rather with—but, never mind, it doesn't matter much who owned the flag first; Red owned it now.

"That's America!" cried a small boy with a big voice. "Ain't he great? He could lick the world!"

At the moment the dog happened to be licking his mouth.

"My land!" exclaimed one old lady. "Another circus come to town!"

"Won't Darling be sore!" shouted a youth home from college.

"Say, who are you?" demanded someone of Red.

Red tipped his hat. "I'm Red Gilbert," he replied. "I'm the one who takes your money."

Just then Tut piped up: "Hurrah for Dirksville! Hurrah for Dirksville!" Then forgetting himself, he added, "Hurrah for Red Gilbert!"

A great roar went up from the crowd, which already had increased to twice its original size. Here was an intelligent bird! Egypt talking to Dirksville! It was a bit like radio!

And then came the cats, one, two, three, four, all hitched together with green ribbons and held

in check by Creampuff. Erick was at the head of the little column, and he didn't like it a bit; he wanted to be at the foot. But at the foot was Whitey, and he wanted to be at the head. Fritz was second and wanted to be third. Clarence was third and wanted to be second. Therefore all their eyes shone green and matched their neckties.

Fred held the guiding ribbons in his left hand; in his right dangled a pasteboard on which had been printed in green crayon: "Persia, Angora, Malta and the Catalina Islands."

"My stars!" exclaimed an old lady. "Just a-look at them cats now, would you? Look at 'em all in step like convicts!"

"Scat! Scat! Scat!" cried the small boy with the large voice.

The cats bolted off to the left, but Creampuff held tight and after some trouble and amid great laughter got them back into formation.

"Scat! Scat! Scat! Scat! Scat!" repeated the small boy, but this time the cats wouldn't scat. Thereupon someone pulled the boy's hat down over his eyes for being too fresh.

Next came the hairless hound in his little blanket; he didn't trot or run—he just seemed to

shiver along. Of course he was labeled "Mexico." Skip, who held the leash that held the hound, looked a bit like a sheik who had fallen into a barrel of paint. His gayly colored robes fluttered to the four winds; at times he looked as if he might fly up into the air and drag Mexico with him—perhaps to drop it where Alaska is. Wouldn't that mix the geologists up, though!

Which looked more ridiculous, the hairless hound or the fortune teller, is hard to say. The crowd couldn't quite decide. First they poked fun at the one, then at the other. Several times Skip felt his anger rising, but each time he looked into the future and saw what would happen in case of a row, and he held his tongue. Mex was better off; he couldn't understand.

"Look at Shapeless Mag an' her dog!" shouted a young fellow with a black eye. "I'd be ashamed of meself!"

Skip looked once at the eye and decided he didn't want one like it; so he managed to grin, though it looked a bit strained.

And then came Paul, and at sight of him the crowd fairly danced up and down.

Paul had his hands full. In his right hand he

held Bonnie Prince Charley ornamented with a placard that read: "China—a good place for a mouse to come from." In his left hand he held Little Lord Fauntleroy; his placard read: "Fisher's Landing—another good place to come from."

That made a tremendous hit, for Red had learned that Fisher's Landing was Dirksville's hated rival in baseball. The crowd clapped their hands and cheered till they were hoarse; and then as they got a good view of Gloom the cheers changed to a mighty roar. Paul was leading the "varmut" by a long rope cable. The dog's head drooped lower than ever, and his great ears left two long tracks behind in the dust; apparently he was having his saddest moment. And on his back was a sign that read, "Russia—think it over."

At that moment there was a little commotion in the crowd. Out of the tail of his eye Paul saw a small red-faced man being supported by two others; someone was fanning his face with a straw hat.

"Who is it? What's happened to him?" Paul heard somebody ask.

There was a hush; then someone replied: "Go

get some water. It's one of Darling's clowns. I think he's laughed himself into convulsions."

Paul chuckled to himself. It looked like a good beginning.

Down Centre Street went the Flying Circus on parade past the city hall, past the post-office, and into the park, where Darling's tents were pitched; and all the while people stopped to stare and then to laugh. Within the little park Red halted his column and, turning, shouted, "Now, boys!"

"Hurrah for Dirksville!" came the cheer.

"Hurrah for Red Gilbert!" echoed the parrot.

"Great stuff!" cried the people. "Lots of pep to those boys!"

"Where's the schoolhouse?" Red asked one of the bystanders.

"Just outside the park. See it over there?"

"Has it a yard where we can pitch our tents?"

"Bet your life!" replied the bystander.

Red thanked him and said he never bet. Then he marched his column toward the place.

Half an hour later they had the tents pitched, and Red had planted a sign announcing that the show would begin at three o'clock.

"Red, you're a wonder!" said Pen admir-

ingly. "We never were more popular in our lives!"

"Popularity," replied Red, taking the little American flag from the St. Bernard's collar and folding it tenderly, "is a fickle thing. Now you have it, and now you haven't." He put the flag into his coat pocket—the one that happened to be over his heart.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Pen. Then he glanced at Red's pocket and grinned. "Red, has Grace ——"

"Now see here, Pen," said Red, "you're too darn inquisitive. You'd better be studying for that bookkeeping exam."

Pen hurried away and concluded that Grace Overton had shifted her affections in the direction of Hector Skinner, whose father was head of the tripe company back at Twin Rapids. No doubt she'd written to Red and told him so.

But Pen was wrong. Grace hadn't written since the boys had left town—which was almost as bad.

CHAPTER XVI

ENVIRONMENT is a powerful influence; just ask the fat missionary who landed among the cannibals. By half-past two, when the people of Dirksville began to cross the park toward the circus, each with the idea that a million laughs per minute was a pretty good bargain for the price of admission, Red looked as if he had never had a gloomy thought. Even the doubtful hound cheered up enough to lift his ears off the ground.

“Step right this way, ladies and gentlemen! Absolutely and without qualifications or reservations the greatest show on earth!” Red was at it again. “You’ve seen Darling’s—now come and see a circus! Step right inside! But, ladies and gentlemen, I warn you to be careful; one of Darling’s clowns laughed himself into convulsions over our parade. Our show is still funnier!”

That sounded a bit like cut-throat competition, but Red was nothing if not thorough.

From the very start things worked as smoothly as slippery elm. Red’s opening speech would

have moved the stony-hearted Sphinx to tears of laughter. Skip sang the funniest songs, and children choked on peanuts as they listened. Creampuff and Vaseline set the small boys to howling, especially when Creampuff ripped his pants on the corner of one of the benches. The parrot surprised even Red with some new expressions that he had picked up; and when Red led Gloom forth and explained some of the reasons for the dog's intense sadness the audience were so sympathetic that they laughed till they cried.

“Gosh, this is great!” said Paul to Fred between acts. “This is the way I like to see things go!”

“Same here,” said Fred. “No fear of a hitch now!”

And then when the show was all over Skip began to tell his fortunes, and the money began to roll in—and the boys began to think of rolling in money. And when the last fortune had been told Pen rolled up his sleeves, opened his ledger and proceeded to mix things up.

It proved to be a perfect day with a perfect ending; Pen balanced his accounts after the seventh attempt—the lucky seventh!

"Well, bookkeeper," said Red, "how much ready cash on hand?"

"One hundred and eighteen dollars and fifty-five cents!"

"Fellows," said Red, lighting the lantern and placing the box of matches on the table, "we've struck our stride! Dirksville is a real town. Darling is making money here, and so are we. We'll give another show to-morrow and maybe another the next day. Oh, boy! I can just see that bath-house back home!"

At the words "back home" he became abruptly thoughtful. Why hadn't Grace Overton written to him? "Poor old Gloom," he said, patting the "varmut's" excuse for a head.

"Misery loves company," muttered Pen.

"Ho hum," said Paul. "I'm dead tired."

"So am I," added Pen and Fred.

"I guess we're all tired," said Red. "Let's turn in."

"Shall I put the royal mice out in the wagon?" asked Skip.

"No, don't bother," said Red. "I'm tired enough to sleep with anything. I'll put the light out—that'll be enough."

A quarter of an hour later Morpheus, the dope

fiend of the gods, had prodded everyone several times with his hypodermic needle; the Flying Circus slept. The lights of the town blinked and went out without saying when they would be back. The watch dogs began their dog watch with one eye open. It was a quiet, ghostly sort of night—the kind that makes you feel as if anything might happen. There was no moon; there were only a few stars, and they were winking as if in a failing effort to keep awake.

A cricket chirped somewhere in the school yard, and as if the sound were a prearranged signal Erick, Fritz, Clarence and Whitey jumped down from the back of the spring wagon and crouched for a few minutes with their heads together. It was the kind of night they loved—a time for mischief and dark deeds. Just for spite Erick made a sudden vicious pass at Whitey, who crouched and spat and waved his tail. Then Erick's wicked meat-hook shot out at Fritz and straightway again at Clarence. After that all four cats sat and snarled softly and manœuvered for position.

Things had gone so astonishingly well with the circus that the cats had been feeling pretty ugly when they sprang from the wagon; by the time

they were through snarling and spitting they were in a terrible mood. Finally Erick swaggered off toward the big tent, and the others followed him. The flap was back, and they entered. There were the royal mice in their cage on the table, dreaming of cheese.

The four pairs of yellow eyes gleamed maliciously in the darkness. One cat after another sprang to the top of the table, and they ranged themselves round the cage. Both mice were asleep, but soon they began to stir uneasily.

Then the four cats began to snarl ever so softly. The mice came awake with a start. At that instant Erick rushed the cage and tried to get his paws inside; like a flash the three others rushed the cage also. Fortunately, the wires were close together, but they were not close enough to suit the mice. Round and round and round they raced, squeaking like a pair of new shoes. The cats pushed the cage now this way, now that way and made cannibalistic noises in their throats. It was good fun for a dark night.

Red, who had been dreaming of blue eyes and golden curls, turned over and muttered in his sleep. Instantly the cats fled. The mice ceased

to squeak and after a while ceased to run, but there was no more sleep for them that night. It's no joke for a mouse to be wakened by four cats all at once! The Bonnie Prince was especially upset. He scratched his ear nervously; he chewed one of the wires, nervously; then he reached out through the bars, upset the box of matches that was lying near by and, pulling a match inside, began to chew it—nervously. And that was the beginning of a great calamity.

Red was still dreaming of blue eyes and golden curls. They were right across the table from him. It was a large table, and round it were seated the English ambassador and his wife, the French ambassador and his wife, the Chinese minister and a dozen other diplomats. Red, in full evening dress, had been speaking to the almond-eyed minister on the matter of controlling the traffic in firecrackers, when, on glancing across the table, he realized to his vast astonishment that he was looking, not at blue eyes and golden curls, but at blue curls and golden eyes! Then his astonishment changed to horror. The blue curls began to wave and ascend like smoke, and the golden eyes —— Suddenly the English ambassador seized him by the shoulder and began

to shake him. Red sprang to his feet, fighting mad!

And there he was sitting up in bed. Skip had him by the shoulder and was shaking him as if he were a mop. "Red! Red! Wake up! Fire!"

Red blinked and opened his eyes wide.

"Fire!" cried Skip. "The tent's on fire!"

"All right," said Red quietly and sprang to his feet.

Suddenly a bright patch of flame shot out of the darkness just above the table, and Red spied the royal mice turning pinwheels inside their cage. "Save the animals!" he shouted and, picking up the cage, ran outside, where in the darkness he pitched headlong over one of the ropes.

When he returned he found Skip doing his best to "save the animals." He was shaking Pen by the shoulders and shouting: "Wake up! Wake up! Fire!"

But Pen only rolled over; it would take more than a fire to waken him. Skip kicked the soles of his feet; Pen began to snore. Thereupon Skip seized his ankles and dragged him out like a sack of flour.

Meanwhile Red had gone to work at the fire with both hands, but it proved to be too much

for him. Some papers on the table had caught, and the blaze had spread to the side of the tent. Now the flames were rapidly eating their way in all directions, fanned by the wind, which hadn't missed a fire in Dirksville for years and didn't intend to miss this one.

"Skip, help me!" cried Red and rushed to find something with which to beat out the flames. "Hurry up! The small tent's afire, too!"

Skip had dragged Fred out by the feet and was now trying to rouse Paul, but Paul was like Socrates after he drank the hemlock.

"Drag him out," said Red. "Then grab something and give me a hand."

As Paul went out by the overland route Red groped on the ground till he found something soft; it proved to be Paul's trousers, but Red had no time to consider. In a moment he was beating away at the side of the tent like a demon with a carpet-beater.

Then in rushed Skip and, seizing Fred's trousers, took his place beside his leader. Swish, sounded the trousers, first Fred's, then Paul's. But all the trousers in the world wouldn't have made much headway against the ever-mounting flames. In five minutes one whole side of the

tent had disappeared, and the fire was creeping rapidly along the sloping top, throwing a lurid glare over the old school yard. Red groaned. The small tent, which a spark from the large one had kindled, was already in ashes.

“Skip,” he gasped, “is there any water near?”

“No,” said Skip, choking. “Only a bucketful for the horses—I’ll get it.”

He tore off toward the wagon, lifted the bucket of water from the weakened spring, on which it was hanging, and rushed back with it. But luck was on the side of the fire; Skip tripped over the sleeping Paul, pitched headlong to the ground, and the bucket landed upside down on Pen’s stomach.

“Ung—gar!” cried Pen, shooting upward like the blade of a jack-knife. “What—what—brrr!”

“Get up, you groundhog!” cried Skip. “We’re on fire!”

Pen got hastily to his feet and began to feel of his pajamas. Then realizing that Skip hadn’t meant to be too literal, he spied the blazing tent. “My books!” he screamed and started forward.

But Skip seized his arm and turned him round.

“Go send in the alarm! Quick! Your books are ashes by now.”

“Where’s the fire box?”

“Don’t know. Go find one—quick!”

Pen’s pajamas—with Pen inside of course—set sail toward the business section of the town. Then Skip rejoined his leader.

“It’s no use,” said Red, looking sadly at the burning tent. “We’d better save what we can.”

The first things Red saved were his shoes and trousers. Skip, who was guided by the same instinct, saved his. Putting them on in two shakes, they then carried out the table and what remained of the clothes and the bedding. Fortunately, the wagon was at a safe distance. Red made sure that all the animals were safe and sound; then he turned to his companion.

“Well, Skip, it’s just another ——”

“Another one of those unfortunate accidents that go to make up the life of a circus man,” said Skip grimly.

“Exactly,” said Red. “Look at it burn!”

“And after the wonderful day we had!”

“After the wonderful day,” said Red. “Say, where’s Paul and Fred?”

“Over there on the grass beyond the wagon, still asleep.”

“We’d better waken them—unless they’re dead!”

Red and Skip crossed to where the two clowns were breathing heavily, and finally by dint of lifting them and dropping them several times they knocked most of the sleep out of them.

“Hey!” cried Paul at last.

“Get up!” shouted Skip.

“Ho hum! Is that—ho hum—you, Skip?” Paul sat up and looked in a bewildered way at Fred, who was sitting up a few feet from him. “Say, where am I? Where’s my pants?”

“They’re burnt up,” replied Red. “There’s been a fire!”

“A fire?” Paul wasn’t very wide awake even now.

“Yes, your pants and Fred’s pants are all burnt up; they died together. The tent caught fire.”

Paul and Fred got slowly to their feet and gazed wide-eyed at the burning canvas, what there was left of it.

“What’ll we do without pants?” said Fred blankly.

“You’ll do without ’em,” replied Skip shortly.
“Anybody who could sleep the way you fellows did oughtn’t to be trusted with pants!”

At that moment a fierce clanging and roaring sounded beyond the park.

“Here come the fire-engines,” said Red, “and just when I was going to go to bed too!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE clanging and roaring increased. The fierce whirr of motors sounded like a party of deep-chested demons on their way home after a wild night. Windows flew open, and heads popped out; then lights began to appear in many of the houses. Pretty soon footsteps began to sound on the hard pavements.

“Gee, this is a hick town,” said Red, yawning.

“Why?” asked Skip.

“Just see how excited folks are getting merely because the fire-engines are called out,” replied Red. “In five minutes there’ll be a crowd here.”

At that moment the first engine rounded the corner of the park, and on the front seat beside the driver sat Pen in his pajamas. Behind came a hose apparatus, followed closely by a long hook-and-ladder wagon. It was thrilling to see them come tearing down the street; all the bells were clanging, all the klaxons were screeching. And the fire, burning slowly up round the pole, was almost out.

“Hi! Yi!” yelled Skip, dashing into the middle of the street. “Here it is! Here it is!”

The engine slowed down and stopped. The men sprang to the ground, and Pen and his pajamas sprang with them.

“Is that it?” shouted the driver, pointing.

“That’s it, sir,” replied Skip. “But it’s most out now.”

“Come on, boys!” shouted the driver, and the men prepared to get out the hose.

The “hooksie” and the other pieces of apparatus drew up on the opposite side of the street. By that time Chief Blazer had arrived in his red roadster. Then the fur flew! Two sets of hose were stretched from a near-by fire-plug. Out came the extension ladders and began to extend themselves. The chief, who seemed to have got the job mainly because of his voice, bellowed orders at the top of it. His men, clad in rubber coats, rubber boots and rubber hats, ran hither and thither, each trying to yell louder than the chief.

“Gosh,” said Red, “wonder how they’d act at a real fire?”

Then someone turned on the water. The great hoses writhed like snakes with the stomachache. Then ss-s-s-coo-f-f! ssss-c-o-o-f-f! and two streams of water shot forth. The first struck the

burning canvas—and the fire was out for the night. The second struck the tent pole near the top and snapped it as a strong man would snap a piece of macaroni.

“I guess that’s a record for putting out a fire,” Red remarked to the chief.

“Pretty close to it,” replied Blazer modestly. “Soak the schoolhouse, boys!” he roared at his men.

Then the schoolhouse got it where it would do the least good, mainly on the slate roof.

“Now soak the trees!” bellowed the chief.

Red thought he had never before in his life seen such a cautious and altogether thorough fire department. They soaked everything within a radius of a hundred yards. Then they turned off the water, and the chief began to inspect. He inspected the remains of the tent; he inspected the trailer and the spring wagon; and then, ordering a ladder placed against the school, he climbed up and inspected the roof.

By that time a considerable crowd had gathered, and day was on its way to school from the east. And with the coming of day three of the boys began slowly to become self-conscious.

"Say, Red, did you save my pants?" asked Pen pathetically.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't. I'm afraid they burned to death."

Pen groaned at the sad news; he had known the pants so well.

Paul and Fred, huddled in the midst of a convenient bush, looked more like clowns than ever; each was thinking of the dear friend he had lost.

"Say, you Chinese-laundrymen had better get into the wagon," Red advised them. "First thing you know the newspaper men'll be here, and then you'll get into the papers—without your pants!"

The three coolies rushed for the wagon. "Blasted cats!" cried Pen as he climbed aboard.

"What are you blasting the innocent cats for?" asked Red.

"Because," replied Pen, "I have a hunch the four of them were somehow responsible for this fire. Probably they chewed matches!"

"What you need is sleep," said Red. "Cats don't chew matches. Only rats and mice 'do."

"Well, then Erick and his gang made the royal mice 'do the chewing," retorted Pen.

Red laughed. "No, Pen, you're wrong

this time; our cats are innocent." All of which shows that even a fellow like Red can make a mistake.

The bell on the town clock was striking five when the firemen decided that they could safely leave the place. Chief Blazer had inquired into the cause of the blaze and was satisfied, though nobody else was, that it had originated from careless cooking.

Red didn't argue with him, though he did talk with a good many of the townsfolk; they knew more than the chief, of course.

"I'll tell you how the fire started," said one young fellow as the firemen drove off. "Some of Darling's men went an' done it!"

"Darling's men? Why should they do it?"

"'Cause you're taking money out of their pockets, that's why."

"You're right, Duke," said another, who doubtless was a king or a prince, himself. "Duke, you're absently right! The boys gave a bang-up p'rade yesterday and then a bang-up show—the best show I ever see. I heard some o' Darling's men talking among themselves last night; I don't know what they said, but I give a guess."

“Well,” said another, “it was a mean trick to play on the kids. I say we fix Darling’s men to-night. I’ll get Hennessy, an’ Hennessy’ll get Ferioli an’ Dutch McCarthy ——”

Red turned away; Pen was calling from the spring wagon: “Hey, when you going to get some clothes for us?”

“Keep your shirt on,” said Red rather irrelevantly since Pen hadn’t any shirt. “I can’t buy anything till the stores open, can I?”

“Well, no—say, Red, did the books really burn?”

“Sure; they mingled their smoke with the smoke from your pants.”

Pen groaned. “But you saved the money?”

“Every cent. And it’ll come in handy too. We’ll have to get new tents, some new blankets and new outfits for the three sleeping beauties including yourself.”

Pen groaned again.

“Now,” said Red, “you and Paul and Fred stay right here and don’t annoy the other animals; Skip and I will see what we can do. You won’t be lonely, ’cause there’ll probably be a big crowd here to see the ruins pretty soon.”

Thereupon Pen and Paul and Fred groaned

all at once; they were not exactly dressed for company.

"Try and get a little sleep, boys," Skip suggested with a grin. "You know you didn't sleep sound last night."

"Aw, have a heart, Skip," said Paul.

The first visitors soon began to arrive, men, women and children, and of course they had to crowd round the wagon. For the benefit of his three comrades in pajamas Red tacked up a sign that read: "Please don't annoy or feed the animals." Then he and Skip set out to buy clothes and to arrange for having new tents made.

At a dry-goods store they bought extra underwear, extra shirts and extra blankets. At a clothing store they bought three pairs of brown corduroy pants; fortunately, the three savages were of a nearly uniform size.

Finally after Red and Skip had arranged for the tents, they started back toward the wagon, which was almost hidden behind the throng of curious people—so curious indeed that Pen had had to hold the back curtains together in order to enjoy that privacy which he in common with Paul and Fred were bent on having. His head was thrust through a small aperture, and if his

face had been black, no doubt the small boys would have started to throw baseballs at him.

"Hello, you African dodger!" shouted Red.
"We've got your pants!"

Pen's head vanished inside.

"So that's what ails 'em!" exclaimed someone. "Their pants got burnt up last night!"

The crowd began to laugh, good-naturedly of course, and small-town wit flew thick and fast. Red and Skip thrust their bundles under the hood. Instantly there was a commotion within the wagon as when a lion tamer throws a piece of raw meat to his pets. The crowd grinned, and the small boy with the large voice yelled: "Put 'em on quick!"

"Listen to 'em," whispered Skip. "They're fighting for the pants!"

"Well, they're out o' luck for sure if they tear 'em," said Red.

CHAPTER XVIII

Two minutes later Pen thrust aside the canvas and sprang to the ground, followed by Fred and Paul. They looked pretty angry, but they looked relieved too.

Suddenly the crowd began to laugh. Here and there men began to point at the new pants. Pen's face turned bright red; he looked down; he looked at his right leg; he looked at his left leg. Then by a remarkable bit of contortion he looked at the back of his legs. Near by, Paul and Fred were going through the same motions.

Still the crowd pointed; still they laughed and slapped their knees. Oh, oh! This was rich!

"Hey, you fellers sure fergot something!" cried a workman. "Turn a handspring and maybe you can see it!"

Pen and Paul and Fred did everything except that. Having failed to discover what they had forgotten, they seemed to be on the point of climbing back into the wagon, when Red stepped forward and, taking Fred by the shoulders, turned him round.

"Now look," he said to the two others.

Pen and Paul looked, and there just below Fred's belt was a tag that read: "Reduced to two dollars."

"You fellows were in such a rush you forgot to take the tags off," said Red. "Come here and I'll dress you right. That's what my nurse used to say to me when I was a kid."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Pen.

"Now," continued Red when he had removed the tags from the bargains, "let's all get busy and straighten up the grounds." He raised his voice: "The crowd can help us if they like."

Thereupon the spectators began to remember important engagements, and in a few minutes the boys had the place almost to themselves.

"Now for breakfast," suggested Skip. "I guess we're all hungry. It was a sort of a wild night, eh, Pen?"

Pen and Paul and Fred managed to grin, and that was the first time since their pants went up in smoke.

"We'll have our new tents day after to-morrow," said Red. "I think we'd all best keep quiet to-day and rest up."

"I'm willing to remain quiet for the rest of my life!" said Pen.

Now that the excitement was over, Red's face took on a far-away look again. He sat down in the grass and, leaning against one of the wheels, began to stroke Gloom's head absent-mindedly. Why hadn't Grace Overton written regularly every other day?

The boys slept that afternoon; then they fed the animals, ate supper and went to bed wherever they could spread their blankets. And then began excitement of an altogether different sort.

Along about eleven o'clock Paul sat up suddenly and bumped heads with Fred. Red roused to his elbow, and Pen and Skip tried to see which was harder, their skulls or the floor of the wagon, under which they were sleeping.

"What was that noise?" cried Pen.

There was a terrible racket going on over in the vicinity of Darling's circus. Crash! Crash! "Ki-yi-i-i! Hey, Rube! Hey, Rube! Hey, Rube!"

The boys got up hastily, and Pen and Paul and Fred searched for their pants; the fire had taught them something.

“Town this way! Look out! Hit ’im! Hit ’im!” “Hey, Rube! Hey, Rube!”

“Jinks!” said Skip. “It’s a free-for-all fight! Who’s Rube, I wonder?”

“Fellows,” said Red, “it’s a fight between the town roughs and the circus men. ‘Hey, Rube’ is the old circus rallying cry. Don’t you remember the guy who was talking to us yesterday and said Darling’s men had set our tents on fire? I mean the fellow who said he’d get Hennessy, and Hennessy would get Ferioli and Dutch McCarthy. Remember he said they’d fix Darling’s men? Well, the fixing is going on now. My land, listen to ’em!”

The cries had redoubled and were punctuated by the sound of blows and the swish of sticks and stones among the trees. The boys crept forward to the edge of the park and watched and listened breathlessly. They could see white-clothed figures rushing and tearing about among the tree trunks; some of them were armed with stakes, the favorite weapon of the circus man; some were armed with stones, the trusty missile of the gangster.

Bang! Crash! “Hit ’im!” “Ouch!” “Hey, Rube! Hey, Rube!” “Grab ’im, Hen-

nessy!" "Look out! Look out!" "Hey, Ferioli!" "Hey, Mac!"

Backward and forward swayed the main line of battle, now close to Darling's tents, now at some far corner of the park. Never had there been such a fight in Dirksville! Awed and fascinated, the boys watched the dashing, dodging figures and listened to the fierce cries and the shrieks of the wounded.

"Fellows," said Red solemnly, "I guess this country needn't ever fear a foreign invasion."

"That's just what I was thinking," said Skip.

The two factions were at close quarters and evidently were evenly matched. Grunts and hoarse cries trembled across the park as if from a multitude of crazy, flaming devils. Blow followed closely upon blow so fast the effect was like that of a small barrage. And in the midst of it all came the shrill blast of a police whistle, then another and another.

"Gee," said Paul, "I'm glad I'm not a cop!"

"That's just what I was thinking," said Skip.

As Red was silent Paul hastened to say: "Red, you're not thinking of taking part in that fight, are you?"

"Oh, no," Red replied promptly. "There are some things I know enough to keep out of."

Paul breathed a little easier.

Now the Dirksville police had got into the mix-up, but the fighting continued as fiercely as before. They couldn't very well use their guns because they couldn't tell one man from another.

Ten minutes later the fire department appeared on the scene, and the noise of hissing streams from the hoses added to the din.

"That ought to cool 'em off," said Fred.

Nevertheless, the battle continued till long into the night and was still in progress when the boys returned to the wagon and crept into their blankets, deeply thankful that Hennessy, Ferioli and Dutch McCarthy hadn't decided to molest *their* circus.

Well, to-morrow was another day. The summer was drawing to a close, and the boys faced heavy expenses. At the moment it certainly looked as if the people back at Twin Rapids, if they wanted to bathe in the river, must put on their bathing suits either at home or in the deep, deep woods. The amount of money Red and his companions had earned thus far, plus an equal

amount from the pocket of old Judge Mudge even, wouldn't build a bath-house big enough for a snake to change its skin in!

CHAPTER XIX

THE following morning the boys and girls of Dirksville woke up with their noses out of joint. Red Gilbert's Flying Circus had no tents and so could give no performance. Darling's circus had fought so hard the night before that all the best performers were suffering with black eyes, sore lips and broken heads; they could not put on a show either.

That afternoon Red had another of his great ideas. Darling's men were in bad shape and probably would remain so for the next few days. Why not see Darling and arrange to give a show in his big tent that night?

"Darling will want us to pay him," Pen objected.

"All right," said Red. "We'll go fifty-fifty on the gate receipts. What do you say?"

"I say we do it," replied Skip.

"Good for you," said Red. "I hate this idle life. I'll rush over and arrange with Darling right now."

Darling, like Barkis, was willing; in fact he was more than willing, for he didn't like the ugly

rumor that his men had set fire to the boys' tents. Just the same he insisted on having half the gate receipts, though Red tried hard to make him be more generous.

After the novel performance had been well advertised the Flying Circus drove into the park, prepared to fly by night. And when night came they hopped off before a record crowd. The big tent was ablaze with lights, and outside some of Darling's disabled were burning red fire, as if to protect themselves against another surprise attack. Mr. Darling, a portly man with puffy cheeks, one of which as a result of the party the night before was rather puffier than the other, introduced Red as Mr. Gilbert, the Sawdust King, who one day would be an emperor.

Red eyed the crowd for a few moments and then turned on the hot air. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I have no desire to be an emperor. My one wish is to please you this evening, to make you laugh, to make you appreciate the intelligence that lies dormant in our common animals ——"

"Doormouse?" whispered a deaf old lady to her neighbor. "Did he say he had a doormouse among his animals?"

But no one paid any attention to her; everyone was listening to Red.

“Now the first number on our programme is, like all our other numbers, a star act.” Red waved his hand to Paul and Fred, who were holding back the four cats. “Ladies and gentlemen, our cats. Erick, Fritz, Clarence and Whitey, front and centre! Make it snappy!”

The two clowns came in with the cats and also with half a dozen colored hoops for them to jump through.

But there was no jumping that night; Erick was in an especially ugly mood. For absolutely no cause at all—unless it was because he had been told to “make it snappy”—he flew at Whitey, snarling, biting and scratching with all four feet. Whitey fought back like a young panther cub. Then immediately Fritz and Clarence put their two cents into it, and the tent, big as it was, wasn't big enough for the four of them. How the fur flew! And how the people cheered and shouted! This was a pretty good act.

But it didn't last long; after considerable work Fred got Fritz and Clarence by the back of their necks and the slack of their kitten breeches and held them out at arm's length. Paul got Erick

and Whitey in the same manner. Then at a word from Red the clowns marched them out of the tent, presumably to jail.

Red raised his hand, and when the noise had subsided he said: "Ladies and gentlemen, that was just an imitation of the little affair that occurred on these grounds last night."

The crowd clapped their hands, and Mr. Darling said to his sword-swallower: "That's a quick-witted young fellow, what?"

The sword-swallower nodded; he couldn't reply because of a bandage that kept his neck from leaking.

The cat fight was the only unpleasant occurrence of the whole evening. All the other acts went well enough to suit even Red, and the crowd were satisfied. Of course the performance wasn't so long or so good as Darling's would have been, but crowds are peculiar; this one had taken a liking to Red and his companions from the moment Tut Ankh Amen, Jr., had shouted, "Hurrah for Dirksville!" Consequently they were ready to meet the boys' humor half-way and bring it home in case it limped.

"Well, men," said Red as the troop reached their old camp grounds beyond the park some

time later, "I guess we made a hit, didn't we?"

"I'll say we did," replied Skip.

"Yes, but did you notice how the cats tried to crab the show right at the beginning?" asked Pen. "I tell you, fellows, we're doing wrong by keeping them!"

Red only laughed. "Do you know what Mr. Darling said to me after the show?"

"What?" demanded his companions.

"He said," replied Red casually, "that he'd give me a steady job as barker with his outfit for the rest of the summer at ten dollars a week, if I'd take it."

"And what did you tell him, Red?"

Red grinned. "I couldn't refuse, could I?"

"What!" cried his companions, suddenly aghast.

"You're going to go with Darling?" said Skip in a weak voice.

"You're going to desert us, Red!" exclaimed Paul.

"Going to leave your old friends for the sake of money!" cried Pen.

"Oh, don't take it so hard," said Red.

"You'll make me feel bad."

"Red," said Fred, "you're not fooling?"

For a few moments Red regarded his reproachful companions in silence. Then he said, "Let's unhitch and care for the animals; then we'll hold a little meeting."

Dumbly Red's companions went about the task of unhitching Duke and Silverheels; dumbly they fed the dogs, the cats, the mice and the parrot. Finally when all were chewing away like a little regiment of coffee grinders Red summoned his partners at one side of the spring wagon.

"Gee, what a gloomy bunch of circus men!" he remarked.

"I guess we've a right to be gloomy," said Pen.

"I never thought you'd desert us, Red," said Skip. "Leave the old outfit stranded and everything."

"Now listen," said Red. "Darling's made me a good offer, and you'll laugh when you hear all of it."

"Huh," said Pen in a tone that was nearer tears than laughter. And then he played his highest trump. "Red, what do you suppose Grace will say when she hears you went and left us in the lurch this way?"

“Pen, you do wield a wicked hammer!” replied Red, grinning. “You’ve hit your thumb again. Now, doggone it, listen, will you? First of all, the summer’s almost over; we’re due home in two or three weeks. Second, Skip can take charge of things in my absence. We’ve raked in considerable coin, and even after we’ve paid for the new tents we’ll have almost enough to build a bath-house with—plus the judge’s dollar for dollar of course. Nevertheless, you fellows go on and cover Smithersville, New Hickston and Greenfield. When you get to Greenfield stay there till Darling’s circus comes along ——”

“Red, are you crazy?” demanded Pen. “What are you driving at?”

“This,” replied Red. “You know, fellows, that I like to do things in a large way. Well, while I was talking to Darling I saw a chance that I couldn’t resist. I made a proposition, and he agreed to it.”

“What was it?”

“This,” replied Red. “When we meet at Greenfield we’ll join forces and go direct to Twin Rapids. And here’s the way we’ll do it. Just picture a bright golden Saturday afternoon. Suddenly our old battle-scarred wagon comes up

over the hill. Behind comes the trailer, and behind that Darling's long train of wagons strung out along the road. But, fellows, it isn't Darling's Five Ring Circus at all; the whole outfit is Red Gilbert's Flying Circus!"

Red's four companions were speechless.

"Of course," Red continued, "it'll just be for the one afternoon. I wanted Darling to give me a week, but he wouldn't. Just the same I'm satisfied."

"How did you get him to consent?" asked Paul in a weak voice.

"Well," Red admitted, rather crestfallen, "he'll get most of the money. I told him the whole town would turn out—and they will! He wondered if he couldn't boost his prices a bit, and I didn't see any reason he couldn't. He's had a hard summer of it, and anyway he's an up-and-coming sort of guy; he likes a new twist to things now and then."

Red's companions began to look a little more hopeful, though they weren't quite sure yet.

"You see," continued Red, "we'll put on our little show just the same—our wind-up performance at home—and we'll advertise Darling's whole outfit *as a side show!*"

The eyes of Red's companions were large and glassy. Pen looked at Paul, and Skip looked at Fred. "Red," said Skip, "I always knew you had nerve, but I never suspected you had all the nerve in the world!"

Red grinned like a broker who has cornered the wheat market. "Well, what do you think of the plan?" he asked, smiling.

"Will it work?" said Pen doubtfully.

"If it doesn't," replied Red, "I'll be the laughing stock of my home town."

"And that," replied Pen, "includes Grace Overton!"

Red colored to the roots of his hair. For once Pen had missed his thumb and hit the nail. Grace may have cast her affections in the direction of Hector Skinner, but would Hec be able to hold them when Red breezed into town at the head of a circus so important that Darling's famous five-ring affair was only a side show? Red thought not.

Skip turned to Paul and Fred and Pen. "Well, boys," he said, "I'll admit I'm doubtful, but Red here, doggone his hide, has cast the die; it's sink or swim for all of us, and I guess we're pretty poor fish if we sink."

"We can't sink," said Red earnestly. "We're flying fish!"

And at that moment from the depths of the covered wagon came the muffled, uncertain voice of Tut: "'Rah for Red Gilbert!" The parrot was talking in his sleep.

The Flying Circus got its tents the next day and moved out of town the day following. Their going was in marked contrast with their arrival; all four of Red's companions were gloomy and silent and doubtful. It seemed that in leaving Red behind, they were doing something very unwise. But once clear of the town, Pen cheered up a bit; and as in all things there was a reason for it.

"Stop at this farmhouse, Skip," he said.

"What for?" asked Skip, leaning back on the lines.

"You'll see," replied Pen and climbed into the wagon.

A few moments later he jumped out, carrying a covered basket, and ran to the back of the house with it.

"What's Penny up to?" asked Fred.

"He's up to his eyes in trouble if he's got what I think he has in that basket," Paul replied.

Just then Pen came round the house on the run. "All right, fellows; let's go!" he shouted.

Duke and Silverheels began to make horseshoe patterns in the dust, and in two minutes the wagon was out of sight of the house.

"Pen," said Paul, "what was in that basket and why?"

"All four cats," replied Pen, "and I guess you know why well enough."

"I thought so," said Paul. "Red'll be sore."

"Can't help it," replied Pen. "I wasn't going to take any more chances. I hate cats!"

"What did the farmer say?" asked Skip.

"Nothing," said Pen. "I left 'em on the back doorstep, and then I came away from there!"

"Well," said Skip a while later, "I'll admit I feel a little better without those cats; they weren't especially sociable."

CHAPTER XX

By the time Darling's Five Ring Circus joined forces with the boys' show at Greenfield, Red had learned to bark well enough to merit a blue ribbon. Moreover, he carried himself with even more of an air than usual; he was now a professional. Nevertheless, his heart was with his old outfit.

After he had greeted his friends he said to Pen: "Well, old man, how do we stand financially?"

Pen stood squarely on both feet so as to convey the proper impression. "Our capital is first-rate," he replied. "Of course our outlay and expenses have been heavy, but as a result of our profits from that night at Dirksville and from several small performances on the way here we have on hand—we have on hand ——"

"Yes," said Red. "I know where it is all right."

"An estimated sum of—of two hundred and twenty-five good, sound, government-made iron soldiers."

Red looked relieved. "Fine," he said. "And how are the animals?"

“All right. That is, all right except the four cats. They’re not with us any more, Red.”

“Oh! Well, I’m not surprised. I hope you didn’t strangle them, Pen.”

“Honest I didn’t!” said Pen earnestly. “I just couldn’t stand them, Red; so I gave them to a farmer, a kind-hearted fellow as far as I know.”

Darling’s circus gave a small performance that afternoon, and the next day both outfits moved to Meeker’s Falls, the town just below Twin Rapids. The following day was Saturday, and at seven o’clock in the morning the two circuses, with the old spring wagon and trailer in the lead, took the road leading north.

The noon whistles at Twin Rapids were celebrating the liberation of the working man, when the Flying Circus appeared on the horizon. Red was driving, and his four companions were marching behind in a column of twos. A short distance behind the trailer marched Jumbo, the biggest elephant in the world; a Hindoo whose name was Flannagan was riding him. Then came a cinnamon bear led by an Italian named Cohen; then a pair of pocket ponies from Shetland; then half a dozen big white horses ridden

by clowns. Those were the only animals that were "allowed out"; all the others rode in cages mounted on trucks pulled by horses and mules. There were at least twenty animal wagons, and behind the bars of the cages snarled all the principal criminals of the animal world—lions, tigers, wolves, panthers, wildcats, catamounts and in fact all the members of the cat family except Erick, Fritz, Clarence and Whitey. There were strange birds too—birds that hopped and chattered, birds that flew and sang, birds that stood on one leg and made faces.

Then came the baggage wagons heaped high with canvas, stakes, tent poles, benches, scenery and all sorts of odds and ends. Following them came strange high-covered wagons painted a gaudy red and smelling of meat and cheese and groceries; they held the grub. And bringing up the rear in a chugging little automobile rode Darling himself and his ticket taker.

There you are, Darling at the rear, Red at the front. What could be sweeter in a fellow's own home town?

Right through Twin Rapids Red led the gay procession while familiar faces stared and blinked and gulped. Yes, familiar faces everywhere!

There were the two butchers and the grocery men; there was the bank president; there was old Judge Mudge, himself, standing on one corner—Red nodded and raised his whip, and the judge, after weighing the matter judicially, nodded in return. There was part of the bunch from the high school; there was Pen's kid sister with her hair "done up"—my, how that girl has grown! But where was Grace? Red searched in vain for her.

On the flat overlooking the river Red halted, and the flat became an active sector. To the merry tune of saw and hammer tents sprang up like mushrooms in your front lawn. Shouts and growls and strange exotic noises filled the air. White glistening canvas, gaudy, glistening wagons and cages, rippling, spanking pennants on long poles, men in bizarre costumes hurrying hither and thither, the smell of popcorn and peanuts, the odor of sawdust and paint and sweating animals, the creak of wheels, the uncertain blare of musical instruments! "Father, give Willie a quarter. The circus has come to town!"

Meanwhile huge posters had appeared throughout the business and residential sections—posters that fairly screamed at you: "RED

GILBERT'S FLYING CIRCUS! SPECIAL FEATURE:
DARLING'S FIVE RING SIDE SHOW!"

By three o'clock everything was ready, and Red was walking on air. He had seen Grace, blue eyes, golden curls and all. It is true she was with Hector Skinner, but hadn't she smiled at him? Hadn't she waved her lily white hand? And there she was now, out in front of Darling's biggest tent, in which Red had decided to give his little show.

With his high hat at a difficult angle he stepped forward and slapped the canvas with his cane. "We're here at last, ladies and gentlemen! Strange animals! Strange sights and sounds! You can't afford to miss it! Positively, abso—gosh darn—lutely the finest, the biggest, the greatest, the most stupendous and awe-inspiring show on earth! Step right in and be convinced!"

And in they stepped, men, women and children in arms. Red personally escorted Grace to a seat and left Hector feeling in his pockets for the price of admission. Hard luck, Hec! Then Red guided the learned judge to a seat at Grace's right. Oh, what could be sweeter in a fellow's own home town!

And then the fun began. The parrot did his



RED PERSONALLY ESCORTED GRACE TO A SEAT AND LEFT HECTOR FEELING IN HIS
POCKETS FOR THE PRICE OF ADMISSION

darndest. So did Mex and King Richard and the mice. Gloom looked his gloomiest, and Duke and Silverheels set a standard for Darling's best. Creampuff and Vaseline were clowns for all they were worth. Skip's voice was beautiful when he sang and convincing when he interpreted the future. Pen made sounds on his violin that set all the animals to jigging. And Red was several points beyond his best! How could he be otherwise with Grace Overton out there looking at him and nodding approval?

In short Red Gilbert's Flying Circus made a new record for altitude. Darling's side show was good, but after all it was only a side show, and anyway, what is a mere professional circus compared with home talent?

At six o'clock it was all over, and Darling's men were preparing for an early start the next morning. Red and his companions were patting one another on the shoulders and, figuratively speaking, on the back.

"Wasn't it great!" cried Pen. "Oh, Red, wasn't it great?"

"You said it!" replied Red.

"Oh, boy!" cried the others.

'And just then across the flat came four cats,

Erick, Fritz, Clarence and Whitey! But this time they weren't in step. They were thin and tired-looking, and their feet were dirty and swollen.

"Well," said Red, "here come the Musketeers and Whitey! You can't very well lose a cat."

"Ho hum," said Pen. "I should worry now. The show's over!"

"Skip, get some condensed milk for them," said Red. "Poor things! What a long walk they must have had!"

"Well, Redfield," said Judge Mudge several days later, "it looks as if you had succeeded. How much did you earn?"

"Three hundred and six dollars and five cents, sir," replied Red promptly and offered the judge a check for the amount of the loan.

"Hum," said Mr. Mudge, putting the check into his pocket and reaching for his check book. "Dollar for dollar; I'm a man of my word."

"That makes six hundred and twelve dollars and ten cents then," replied Red. "I think we can have a red tile roof on our bath-house."

The same afternoon Red was walking with Grace down by the river. "This is where we'll build it," he said.

“ Oh, won’t that be nice!” said Grace. “ I like a boy who does things in a big way—like you, Red. Can you come to supper to-morrow? Papa’s home from China and wants to meet you.”

“ I’ll be there with my own napkin!” replied Red. “ Say, Grace,” he added, without meaning to be especially pious, “ why didn’t you write to me all summer?”

“ Red, you silly boy,” said Grace in the tone that all men like, “ how could I possibly write to you when you never put your address on any of your letters?”

Red swallowed hard. For one of the few times in his life he was without an answer.

“ Silly boy,” repeated Grace, “ but just the same I like you.”

“ As well as Hector Skinner, the Tripe King’s son?”

Being a girl, and a pretty one, Grace turned her head. Then at last she said, “ I guess maybe a little.” But she said it in a way that meant a lot—and perhaps some day the lot will have a house on it.

That’s the end of Red Gilbert’s Flying Circus. It had been a great summer for Red and his

companions, even though poor Pen did flunk his bookkeeping examination after all.

THE END

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